

choice

MARCH 2008 • CHOICE.COM.AU



Chooks on test

Expensive free-range or organic chicken tastes no better than a standard chook.



Alcopops

Do they tempt young teens to drink by looking cool and tasting like soft drink?

On test

- + Espresso machines
- + Mobile phones
- + Washing machines
- + Cook's knives
- + Car DVD players
- + First aid kits
- + Carpet stain cleaners

The recycled water debate

Is it *really* so hard to swallow?



Changing your bank account can save you money

House evaluation websites not accurate enough

Health by numbers — know your figures

150 PRODUCTS
RATED!

CHOICE's top-value Best Buys: Washing machines, espresso machines, cook's knives

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EMAIL ausconsumer@choice.com.au

How CHOICE helps you. CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. Because we pay full price for the products we test, we can remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry — our only aim is to give consumers the best possible information about buying products and services. Our income is only from subscriptions to our magazines and choice.com.au, and from other services we supply for the benefit of consumers. We're not a government body and we don't receive government funding.

We have laboratories in Marrickville, Sydney, that test everything from juicers to plasma TVs, coffee grinders to MP3 players and air conditioners. We test hundreds of products every year. There's no hidden agenda to our testing — we simply road-test products so that consumers like you don't get ripped off. CHOICE ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys.

CHOICE also has staff who research a wide range of consumer services — everything from the financial industry to the organic food business, supermarket practices to drug companies and pharmacies. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate quality and claims.

CHOICE has also always campaigned about consumer goods and services that affect your life. We lobby government and regulators on behalf of all consumers in Australia. CHOICE was established in 1959 and is a not-for-profit, non-party-political organisation.

CHOICE Best Buy

**BEST
BUY**

CHOICE nominates a product as a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has a Best Buy.

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**CHOICE
SHOPPER**
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Comment

Get tough on junk food



Saturday 15 March is World Consumer Rights Day — and this year's theme is 'Junk Food Generation'. It will promote a global consumer campaign to end the marketing of unhealthy food to children.

In Australia today, at least one child in five is overweight or obese. The health consequences mean this generation of children may be the first to die at an earlier age than their parents. While there's no single culprit, World Health Organization findings confirm what every parent already knows: that the relentless marketing of junk food influences children's food choices, and ultimately their diet. CHOICE has long been campaigning for tougher restrictions on junk food marketing to children, as current regulations are failing to curb the glut of ads for unhealthy foods that appear during children's TV shows.

But it's much more than TV ads. Visit any supermarket and you'll find a range of products featuring kids' favourite characters like Nemo, Bratz and Barbie. At the movies, in magazines or online, games, toys, celebrities and popular cartoon characters double as mascots for an endless array of sugary and high-fat snacks. Even on the sporting field, sponsorship deals mean the logos of fast-food companies are emblazoned on children's chests as they sprint towards the finish line.

We're not suggesting parents shirk responsibility. Ultimately, they're responsible for what their kids eat and for helping them develop healthy eating habits. Nor do we want to ban chips, burgers or chocolate — or any of the foods we all indulge in occasionally. But the relentless, multimillion dollar promotion of junk food to kids is making the job far tougher for parents than it ought to be.

To help drive the message home during World Consumer Rights Day, go to choice.com.au/FedUp and tell us which food marketing campaign has raised your blood pressure, which foods your kids have pestered you to buy and some of the cheekier persuasion tactics they've attempted. And from 15 March, you can also sign our petition to government and industry leaders calling for tougher restrictions on junk food marketing — putting little bellies before big profits. ■

Anny Friis
Editorial Director

WASHING
MACHINES
PAGE 48

On test

- 34 + Espresso machines** \$180–\$250 gets you a machine that makes good coffee.
- 38 + Mobile phones** The best models overall and for music, photos or just a basic phone.
- 44 + Cook's knives** CHOICE tested 20 cm cook's knives to find the best and the sharpest.
- 48 + Washing machines** Few washing machines are water-efficient and rinse well; CHOICE's latest test found two that do.
- 54 + First aid kits** Nine of the tested kits couldn't cope with five common emergencies.
- 58 + Carpet spot cleaners** They're mostly more effective on nylon than wool carpets.
- 60 + Car DVD players** They don't perform very well, and there are safety concerns.



CHOICEextra.com.au

This is a free website for CHOICE magazine subscribers. It's an index of articles going back to Jan/Feb 2002, with links to PDFs so that you can read many of them immediately. You log in with your subscriber number, which is above your name on the mailing label that comes with the magazine.

+ TAP WATER BEST

Dumping bottled water

Bottled water has been criticised for being eco-unfriendly — and it has other disadvantages too.

With more and more people drinking fluoride-free bottled water, it could be affecting dental health, particularly children's.

Australians spend around \$385 million a year on bottled water, and vast amounts of greenhouse gases are generated from manufacturing the PET bottles, bottling the water, transporting it and refrigerating it. And with more and more people opting to drink bottled water — which isn't fluoridated — over tap water, there are concerns it could be affecting dental health, particularly in children.

The environmental impact and the fact that most people living in NSW have a perfectly good tap water supply have driven the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change to eliminate its non-essential use of bottled water. Although staff can still buy their own, this too is being discouraged. Manly Council in Sydney has followed suit, banning council purchases of single-serve bottles of water.

Most water bottles end up in landfill or as litter — only 35% get recycled. This is largely because we tend to drink bottled water away from home, where there are often no recycling facilities. Clean Up Australia is calling for container deposit schemes (where you get a few

cents for each empty bottle you return) to be reintroduced as a way to deal with container littering in public places. Manly Council has resolved to install more bubblers to encourage public use of tap water.

When CHOICE tested bottled water in July 2005, tasters couldn't distinguish between bottled water and tap water. If you like to drink on the run and really don't like the taste of tap water, you can easily opt for something less environmentally and financially costly than bottled water. Keep a reusable bottle of tap water on the bench, and after a few hours the smell and taste of chlorine will disappear. Then you can pop the bottle in your bag when you go out. ■



WIN! CHOICE BEST BUY ESPRESSO MACHINE!



When you've read the article on espresso machines, page 34, just answer this simple question and you'll be in the running to win our Best Buy machine:

- An espresso is: 30 mL? 60 mL? 120 mL?

To enter online, go to choice.com.au/competition, or send your answer to 'Best Buy March 08', CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Include your name, address daytime phone number and subscriber number. The competition closes on 31 March 2008. Check choice.com.au/competition for full conditions of entry.

+ TRAINING THE TRAINERS

Getting tough on yogis

For many of us, yoga is simply a great way to stretch and get toned. While we may not know our camel from our cobra, for those with a real passion for the ancient practice, it's important that classes adhere to tradition.

Fitness Australia and the Yoga Teacher's Association of Australia (YTAA) have teamed up to announce new national guidelines requiring fitness instructors to undertake a minimum amount of yoga training in order to teach yoga. The new guidelines will take effect early this year.

As the yoga industry is unregulated, it's currently possible for instructors to teach yoga classes without substantial training. The YTAA says that while these instructors aren't necessarily putting students in danger, the authenticity of the yoga they're teaching may be questionable. However, in the future, you can be assured that in a gym setting, your teacher will be qualified to a level approved by the YTAA. ■



"Consumers don't understand that privacy policies on websites are just notices. They don't guarantee any rights."

+ INTERNET PRIVACY

Many people unaware of internet data tracking

A recent poll conducted by the University of California and the University of Pennsylvania has revealed that US consumers are largely unaware that websites can sell their personal information to marketing companies, as well as track and monitor internet activity.

The report reveals that over 55% of those surveyed assumed websites that include a privacy policy would not provide private information such as their address or purchase history to third parties, when in fact this is not necessarily the case. Furthermore, 37% believed that the mere presence of a privacy policy ensured a website wouldn't analyse internet viewing habits.

One of the authors of the report, Chris Hoofnagle, says that while companies may suggest they won't track customer data, loopholes can be found for them to do so. "Consumers don't understand that privacy policies are just notices. They don't guarantee any rights," he says. According to him, online business practices simply aren't meeting consumer expectations.

In a move to combat the practice, the US Federal Trade Commission has been asked to ensure that websites don't mislead consumers into falsely believing their privacy is protected. ■

+ WEAK CONSUMER PROTECTION

Tougher laws needed for complementary medicine

Hundreds of weight-loss drugs on the market aren't tested for efficacy before they reach consumers, according to a new study published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

CHOICE has often said it, and now researchers from Melbourne's La Trobe University are also arguing that existing controls on the supply and promotion of complementary medicines in Australia are weak, leaving consumers vulnerable to questionable health claims.

Under the current system, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) can classify new products as 'listed' goods without needing to see evidence that they work. This contrasts with 'registered' medicines, which are tested for efficacy and safety before entering the market.

Professor Ken Harvey, co-author of the study, revealed that in the decade to 2006, over 1000 complementary weight-loss products were listed by the TGA, compared to only nine conventional weight-loss medicines that were registered.

"The TGA has made it very easy for a product to be listed with the online registration process," he said. "As long as you procure herbs from a long list of what the TGA regards as relatively safe, they don't test for efficacy."

"Many consumers are quite unaware that listed medicines don't undergo the same stringent evaluation process as registered medicines."

The Complementary Healthcare Council (CHC) says the low-risk nature of complementary weight-loss drugs means efficacy testing isn't necessary. "The fact is that the ingredients used in weight-loss products have all been reviewed by the complementary medicine's evaluation committee and are determined to be safe," it says.

CHOICE sees this as a classic example of missing the point: the

complementary products may be safe, but the weak controls mean consumers can waste their money on something that doesn't work.

The CHC notes that close to 25% of all new listings are subject to a review by the

TGA. "Anyone who makes a claim has to not only hold the evidence [for it] but also make a certification that they hold the evidence to support the claim — and that's a legally binding document."

"If the TGA feels the evidence isn't strong enough, they can de-list the products and there can be legal actions, so the sanctions are pretty severe."

Currently, the only way for consumers to identify whether a product has been evaluated by the TGA is to look for an AUST-R (registered) or AUST-L (listed) code on the packaging, which is often difficult to spot. And there's no indication whether the evidence for the listed product has been evaluated.

"Some of the listed products should have something on the label that says they haven't been evaluated," says the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia. "It would give the consumer the opportunity to then ask the questions or perhaps seek their own evaluation by researching on the internet."

"The labelling authority of the TGA should insist that there be better labelling. It would be a great help to overcome a lot of confusion that's out there with complementary medicines." ■



GM DILEMMA

Ban lifted on GM canola

A ban on genetically modified (GM) canola crops was allowed to lapse in NSW and Victoria early this year — a move that could make it difficult for consumers to choose GM-free products.

The commercial production of GM canola has been banned in all states where canola is currently grown, but these bans are up for review this year. The four-year moratorium in Victoria originated because of concerns about cross-contamination between GM and non-GM crops; it expired in February 2008. While the Victorian government argues this will deliver environmental and financial gains for the farming industry, consumer groups and anti-GM advocates aren't convinced.

Besides the risk of cross-pollination during production, there are concerns that once the crops are harvested, it will be difficult to retain two separate streams for transportation and storage of GM and non-GM canola.

Labelling could also pose problems. Under the current system, if a product is highly refined (sugar or oil, for example), it's exempt from being labelled as genetically modified. As canola oil is used in a wide range of food products, including baked goods, margarine and mayonnaise, shoppers won't be able to tell whether a product contains GM canola.

In a CHOICE survey in 2003, over 80% of consumers said they were concerned about eating GM foods and 72% said they refer to food labels to avoid GM products.

Advocacy group Gene Ethics agrees that without a proper labelling system in place, consumers will lose the ability to make informed choices: "As it is, the so-called 'choice for farmers' — even though the majority of farmers don't want the technology — is actually going to take everybody else's choice away. This will affect the food processing industry, the governments that want to remain GM-free, and shoppers."

Gene Ethics argues that the moratorium on GM canola should remain for a further five years, after which the full environmental and consumer impacts can be assessed. ■



THANK YOU FROM CHOICE

We'd like to say thank you to Mr and Mrs Almgren of Beecroft, NSW, who have again acknowledged CHOICE's work for consumers with a generous donation. CHOICE is a non-profit organisation funded solely by subscribers to the magazine and website and sales of our other products, and we're always very grateful for such extra support from subscribers.

REVERSE MORTGAGES

Traps of reverse mortgages

A new report finds most borrowers with a reverse mortgage don't fully understand how it works.



Signing up for a reverse mortgage can mean you have too little money left to move into your aged-care housing of choice.

ISTOCKPHOTO

Ian (not his real name) is a retired pensioner in his 70s. He took out a reverse mortgage to assist his son's business, consolidate some debts, renovate his house and buy a new car. The approved credit limit was \$135,000, more than he originally indicated he needed. However, after two and a half years he's used up almost all the available credit.

Ian now says he wishes he'd never taken out the loan and has put his house on the market to repay the debt. He

plans to buy a smaller house in a different area, and says: "I've been in business all my life and never had to budget. I might have to budget now. I just thought, 'I can improve my standard of living', that's what it's all about ... You do have a false sense of security ... [but] interest keeps compounding. Then your standard of living will drop."

A recent report on the subject by the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) found most of the 29 borrowers interviewed didn't fully understand how a reverse mortgage worked; for example, about half didn't know how much the loan was likely to cost them over time. Borrowers can be paying off their reverse mortgage after a very long period, as it's usually only repaid when you die or move into long-term aged care. However, ASIC found that only very few borrowers had done long-term planning.

Signing up for a reverse mortgage can leave you vulnerable to a number of undesirable situations, such as having too little money left to be able to move into your choice of aged-care accommodation, or leaving a smaller than intended inheritance for your children.

The report also found problems with the service borrowers got from the lender, mortgage broker or planner:

- Most didn't get information about the risk involved.
- Ten said the lender had approved a higher loan than they'd requested, and half of them had accepted it.

Several borrowers said they found it hard to resist the availability of constant credit and regretted how quickly they'd exhausted the funds.

If you've had an experience with a reverse mortgage, we'd love to hear from you. Please write to **Money Team**, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or send an email to reversemortgage@choice.com.au. ■

+ ORGANIC FOOD

Jumping the gun on organics

The release of preliminary results from a study of organic produce has organic supporters shouting the findings from the rooftops.

The reported preliminary findings suggest organic produce has 40% more antioxidants than non-organic produce, plus higher levels of vitamin C and beneficial minerals such as iron and zinc. It also suggests that organic milk can contain 60% more antioxidants and beneficial fatty acids.

The ongoing research is being conducted by the EU-funded Quality Low Input Food project (QLIF), which aims to improve the safety and quality and reduce the cost of organic and 'low input' food supply chains.

While being offered as proof of the nutritional superiority of organic over conventional produce, the study is as yet unpublished, and so hasn't been subject to peer review. If the results are proven accurate, it will certainly add to the body of evidence of organic food having nutritional advantages, but we can't be certain of the significance of the

results until the study is published. It's also not possible to know whether the results would be replicated in Australia, given our different farming conditions.

However, it seems Australians are taking the organic message to heart, with recent research by The Nielson Company showing only one in five people didn't buy any organic produce, and those that bought organic or functional food (food tailored for specific health benefits) did so for perceived health benefits. Eggs, vegetables and fruit were the most popular organic foods purchased.

While the early reports from the QLIF project sound promising, we need to see the final published results. In the meantime, if you want to go organic, make sure the food you buy is at least certified. For more information, see *The rise and rise of organics* (CHOICE, August 2007) or go to choice.com.au/food. ■

+ WIN FOR CONSUMERS

A 'listing and switching' service will be available to help you change banks more easily.

Switching bank accounts easier

In a win for CHOICE and consumers, Federal Treasurer Wayne Swan has fast-tracked a plan to make it easier for customers to switch everyday bank accounts. A 'listing and switching' service will be available to consumers, whereby banks will be obliged to provide a list of all your automatic debits and credits over the past 13 months, to help you change banks more easily. In the past, banks weren't required to provide these details, leaving the individual consumer with the painstaking job of re-establishing their direct debit and credit arrangements. The new service is operational immediately, with full implementation by November 2008.

CHOICE has campaigned for the past three years for a simple, low-cost and low-risk switching system that allows consumers to 'vote with their feet'. ■

HELP WANTED TELL US YOUR CAR RENTAL STORIES

Unfair contracts? Dubious damage claims? Loopholes in insurance cover? Outrageous excess? Misleading pricing information? Mechanical problems? Restrictions on use? Other scams?

We're investigating the car rental industry later this year and want to hear your stories about experiences with rental cars.

Please write to *Car rental*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or send an email to carrental@choice.com.au.

In brief

Taste-drive your food

A US marketing company has invented edible strips that contain the flavour of new food products, as mapped out by scientists.



The strips can be attached to magazines like perfume ads, feeding readers' curiosity with flavours like glazed doughnuts and premium mojitos — a tasty idea that originated in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

DIY disease detection

A finger-prick blood testing kit that detects early signs of disease could be available within 10 years, say US researchers. The technique relies on the fact that each organ in the body secretes a set of proteins into the blood, creating what's called an organ-specific molecular fingerprint. When disease strikes the brain, liver, kidney or other organ, it alters the protein fingerprint. The proposed test would be able to detect such changes.

Who on Earth Cares?

Who on Earth Cares is an Australian Conservation Foundation campaign aimed at showing our leaders that the community wants immediate action on climate change. Put yourself on the 'I care' map or make your own commitment for action on www.whoonearthcares.com. So far over 18,000 people have joined the campaign; CHOICE has also joined.

PORTABLE PC

Little laptop, big value



ASUS Eee PC

Price \$499 Contact www.asus.com.au

It's barely half the size and weight of even a slimline laptop computer, but the Eee PC from ASUS has all the features you might expect in a larger PC.

The Eee name stands for 'easy to learn, easy to work, easy to play'. Using a version of the Linux operating system set up to run lean and mean — that is, quickly and on little power — it starts up in seconds and runs more than three hours on a single charge.

The Eee PC comes ready-to-go with plenty of programs installed to handle common tasks such as email, web browsing, instant messaging, photos, music and video viewing. It also works with Word and Excel files and you can use the built-in webcam and Skype program for video and voice chat. Access to the internet is easy to set up using the built-in wireless networking (Wi-Fi).

Weighing less than 1 kg, the Eee PC is aimed at the education market and has been made suitably small and rugged. Adult users, especially touch typists, may find the keyboard a little too small.

When not taking advantage of its portability, you can use the Eee PC like a desktop computer by connecting a standard USB keyboard and mouse. You can also connect a full-sized external screen to the VGA port.

After programs, the 4 GB solid-state storage drive has less than 1.5 GB for user data, but you can add extra storage via a USB port or the multi-format memory card slot.

At just under \$500 it sets a new standard for laptop value. Asus has also announced a future Windows version of the Eee PC. The ASUS Eee PC is available from major department stores and retail outlets.

See the full story in the March/April 2008 issue of *CHOICE Computer*. To subscribe, call 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to choice.com.au/magazines. ■

SMALL TRAVEL COTS

Have cot, will travel

Normal portable cots can be fairly bulky, even when folded up, so in fact travelling with them isn't always convenient, especially if you're camping or out on a picnic. Small travel cots like the BABY NATION and KINDERKOT help address that problem. They have foldable wire frames, so they're lightweight and very compact when folded, UV-resistant fabric to help protect against the sun, and mesh to keep out the bugs.

Our tester found both easy and fairly quick to set up, though the BABY NATION is a bit fiddly. Folding them up takes practice, and for the KINDERKOT requires some force. Also, the KINDERKOT has a self-inflating mattress that must be rolled slowly to deflate, so it's a bit slower to pack it up.

Neither cot has any major safety risks. They're robust enough in construction, and don't have any potential head, limb or finger traps. However, there is some risk from the soft bedding (the KINDERKOT has a soft sleeping bag and the BABY NATION has a soft fabric mattress). A baby sleeping face down on these could be at risk of suffocation. (KINDERKOT now recommends that the sleeping bag shouldn't be used for children under 18 months.) A firm mattress is better for a baby, though it might make the cot harder to fold. As long as your baby sleeps on their back, as recommended by the SIDS Council of Australia, there shouldn't be any significant risk from these cots.

The BABY NATION is suitable for babies up to about 18 months old; the KINDERKOT is a bit larger and is suitable for children up to the age of four. Unlike standard portable cots, both are too small to use as a playpen.

If you use one of these cots outdoors — such as at a picnic or when camping — you should anchor it to ensure it can't move around. The KINDERKOT has four loops suitable as anchoring points, though no pegs are provided. The BABY NATION has no anchoring points, so might not be suitable outdoors on a windy day.

CHOICE VERDICT

They aren't a substitute for a proper cot, maybe not even for a standard portable cot, but if you want a travel cot that's very light, very portable and useful outdoors, the BABY NATION and KINDERKOT will do the job. ■



BABY NATION Pop-Up Sleep Easy

Price \$100 Weight 1 kg
Dimensions when folded
(cm, H x W x D) 28 x 31 x 22
Dimensions when assembled
(cm, H x W x D) 57 x 55 x 95
Contact 03 9553 0024
Dale Importers (Australia)



KINDERKOT Indoor/Outdoor Travel Bed

Price \$140 Weight 3 kg
Dimensions when folded
(cm, H x W x D) 44 x 48 x 24
Dimensions when assembled
(cm, H x W x D) 62 x 135 x 89
Contact www.kinderkot.com.au

+ MINI FOLDING BIKE



Mini A Bike

Price \$149

Contact www.hunterleisure.com.au

A Bike; B grade

This mini aluminium folding bike seems like a great alternative to a scooter. It's eye-catching, has inflatable tyres, weighs less than 6 kg, folds cleverly into a compact package and comes with its own carry bag.

Unfortunately, that's where its good points end. The bike's frame wobbles and flexes when ridden, making it uncomfortable and hard to control. The small wheels don't handle bumps and potholes very well. The tyre valves are almost impossible to get at with a standard pump; a shock pump may be more suitable. The bike is

too small to suit a large person (it has a maximum weight rating of 85 kg).

CHOICE had two riders put it to the test. Both are less than 85 kg and are experienced bike riders. They didn't enjoy riding it at all — in fact they thought it felt unsafe, and said they wouldn't buy it at any price.

This bike appears to be a copy of the Sinclair A-bike (see www.a-bike.co.uk). The Sinclair retails in the UK for £150 (about \$345) and has had several positive reviews. We can only assume the Sinclair original is much better constructed than its cheaper clone.

As for this bike ... you're better off with a good scooter — or just walking. ■

+ PVR WITH PROBLEMS

Great recipe but half-baked...

At first glance, the BEYONWIZ DP-S1 seems ideal. It has a DVD player plus two high-definition (HD) digital tuners that deliver good-quality reception and can record two channels at once. You can also use the BEYONWIZ to watch movies and listen to music stored on your computer, over an Ethernet connection.

With the 200 GB hard drive you'll find yourself running out of room very quickly if you want to keep recordings at HD quality. One option would be to connect an external hard drive, with the BEYONWIZ supporting USB 2.0 external hard drives and removable flash drives. A memory card reader lets you download your digital photos, video or music files directly from an SD or Compact Flash (CF) card.

High-quality component video, digital audio and HDMI connections allow the best possible viewing quality, with standard composite video and stereo audio connections also available if you need to hook up your old VCR or TV.

If you think all this sounds too good to be true, you'd be right. Among the drawbacks is



Beyonwiz DP-S1 PVR

Price \$1299

Contact www.beyonwiz.com.au

that you can't record to a DVD with this machine. And the DVD player performed badly in our damaged DVD test, so you may have trouble watching older or rented DVDs.

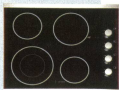
You can't move video from the BEYONWIZ to a PC over an Ethernet connection, which would let you burn a DVD if needed. This is to be resolved in a future firmware upgrade, as are other issues, such as being unable to record a TV show while watching a DVD.

Computer users often have to cope with endless firmware upgrades for products that aren't ready to be released, but you shouldn't have to deal with that in the lounge room. In time, the BEYONWIZ DP-S1 may become a great PVR. But until then, it remains half-baked. ■

Coming

Ceramic cooktops

If you're going for an electric cooktop, the most popular option is a ceramic cooktop with radiant elements. Cooks love its streamlined good looks, easy-to-clean surface, good cooking performance and mid-range price tag. CHOICE tested 12 radiant ceramic cooktops and found they're all pretty good.



Clothes dryers

If buying a clothes dryer only springs to mind when it's been raining for a week and you have no dry towels, your buying decision may well be determined by a good price. But if you plan on getting more than the odd run from your dryer, a gas model is worth considering for its shorter drying time and reduction in CO₂ emissions. CHOICE tested 13 dryers, two of which are gas-powered models.

106 cm televisions

CHOICE tested six televisions of this size with an LCD screen and three with a



plasma screen. Each type has some particular characteristics, but for the most part there are relatively small differences when it comes to overall image quality. Our results show it's possible to get a very good picture with either type.

Write or email — we want to hear from you.

Your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. See opposite for how to contact us.

Restaurant hygiene



■ Your November 2007 article failed to mention that currently there's no industry-relevant qualification required to register or

operate a restaurant, commercial catering operation, bakery, takeaway or nationally franchised fast-food premises. There's a requirement, however, to comply with food safety legislation.

Unfortunately, without proper training, particularly in food safety, it's more often the case that eventually untrained operators experience a food contamination issue resulting in potential patron food poisoning.

I'd urge CHOICE and all its readers to contact their relevant state health ministers to demand that at business registration, evidence is provided with respect to recognised food safety qualifications, prior to an operation trading.

Public health should be a right, not a gamble. After all, when we're in need of medical assistance, do we not go to a qualified practitioner? So why aren't we protected with properly qualified professionals when we dine out?

Eldert Hoebee

CHOICE says *The relevant food act in Victoria has a requirement for food safety training, and Queensland recently introduced a similar requirement. Food businesses must also comply with the Food Standards Code, which requires them to implement a food safety program that's subject to periodic audit. Businesses must*

also ensure that people undertaking or supervising food handling operations have appropriate knowledge of and skills in food safety and hygiene.

If you're concerned that you can't access food hygiene inspection information about the restaurants you go to, sign our campaign letter at choice.com.au/restauranthygiene and use the space provided to add your own message to health ministers demanding that food hygiene/safety qualifications be made a requirement for food businesses to be able to register for operation.



How fair is Fairtrade?

■ I am a recently reformed

chocolohic, chocolate crazy, until I read to my horror of the atrocities of child slave labour. The food of heaven, produced in hell. It was enough to turn me right off. These days chocolate has a decidedly bitter taste for me, and I generally refuse to buy it or eat it.

Recently I decided to treat myself to a bar of Fairtrade chocolate, not something I've done before due to the cost: \$3.50 for 50g from Oxfam. Expensive, when compared with most regular chocolate bars, but a small price, I reasoned, for the assurance that no child slavery was involved.

To my dismay, the label said that as little as 76% of the cocoa used was sourced from Fairtrade producers. I wondered how fair this 'Fairtrade' label really is.

I was delighted that the very next CHOICE issue (November 2007) contained the article *A taste for Fairtrade*, but disappointed to find that nothing was mentioned about only a percentage of the ingredients of Fairtrade products being sourced from Fairtrade producers.

I'm unfortunately still confused and

concerned: if a product is labelled as 'Fairtrade', then surely it should be 100% fair. Is this also occurring with other 'Fairtrade' products?

Karen Slimmon

CHOICE says *Child labour in the cocoa-farming industry is a longstanding concern of Fairtrade advocates. As our story mentioned, there are strict standards that Fairtrade-labelled products must stick to in order to obtain certification. And according to FTAANZ Fairtrade Certification Analyst Cameron Neil, the chocolate bar Karen purchased from Oxfam is not exception.*

The 76% mentioned on the bar is the overall Fairtrade content of the chocolate bar, not the proportion of Fairtrade cocoa used. The cocoa used in the chocolate bar is 100% sourced from Fairtrade producers, as is the cane sugar. They both have the letters FLO (Fairtrade Labelling Organisation) next to them on the ingredients list. But since chocolate is made up of multiple ingredients, producers have to source non-Fairtrade ingredients such as milk powder, vanilla and soy lecithin, where a Fairtrade alternative is not available.

To find out more about the Fairtrade standards for products, go to www.fairtrade.net/standards.html.

Are the courts the only answer?

■ Upon reading your latest review on mobile phone servicing I thought I'd share my experience. Some years ago I had a problem with a mobile phone from Ericsson that was still under warranty — it was clearly a warranty claim. Both the local repairer and Ericsson refused to help.

I instructed my solicitors to issue proceedings in the Magistrates Court in Queensland. The matter progressed to

Ericsson filing a defence, but because of certain technical problems with the defence, I was in a position to threaten to enter judgment. Proceedings were eventually settled, in my favour, for \$2000 plus an amount for costs. It cost me \$120 to arrange to have the phone fixed.

Ericsson tried to insert a confidentiality clause in the settlement agreement, but I refused and there is none. I think the story shows what can be done but, of course, most people simply couldn't afford the costs associated with such an action. However, the courts really are the only answer to these phone suppliers. It seems clear that they're willing to endure bad publicity and adverse treatment by consumer bodies and the like.

Tony Moon

CHOICE says *Tony's experience shows what you can achieve when you're able to take things to a court or small claims tribunal. But we'd like to think consumers who aren't in a position to take legal action will also get a fair and reasonable outcome to a simple warranty claim — with the help of the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman and/or the state and territory fair trading/consumer affairs offices. To contact them, check out www.tio.com.au or www.accc.gov.au, which has links to the fair trading offices, or phone the TIO on 1800 062 058.*

Thank you, CHOICE

■ Thanks to your comprehensive report on health funds, we're now saving around \$800 a year. I've been a loyal subscriber for about 16 years, but had never written to express my gratitude for your fantastic work that has helped us make very good decisions and save money as well.

My husband was a member of a health fund for 28 years and it took a lot of persuasion to convince him to switch to one in your 'recommended' list. My battle now is to convince him to switch to a super fund where no fees are paid to financial advisers, or other unnecessary fees. Thank you very much again.

Lida Dow

Thumbs up!

■ Gabriella Marengo wants to let other people who have problems with their Sony camera know that she found Sony Centre staff "very professional and helpful" when her Cybershot camera suddenly stopped working after three years. Unhelpful camera shop staff had told her it wasn't worth repair, but staff at the Sony Centre investigated and had it fixed free of charge.

■ Jackie Bazzo gives her Thumbs up to Mirabella, which sent her two glass lampshades to replace those she'd broken, plus one spare — all free of charge.

■ Leonie Jones is impressed with Electrolux, which replaced her 14-month-old washing machine with a new one after she'd waited for a replacement part for two weeks already and was looking at another four-week wait.

*Address your letters to **Thumbs up!** at the address below.*



LETTER OF THE MONTH

Retractable dog leads

■ You did an excellent article on retractable dog leads that helped me decide on the one I will buy. From a risk management point of view, it's wise to purchase one with at least 25% overcapacity on the weight question.

[The US company] Flexi has an excellent warning page on its website, www.flexiusa.com/warnings.asp. This fact alone should tell everyone that this is a more responsible manufacturer. For my 70 pound [32 kg] dog, I'll buy the highest rated 150 pound [68 kg] lead. The fact that other manufacturers have these types of warnings might help Louise Hiatt recover costs and damages from Woofaz.

Frantz F. NSW

To thank you for taking the time to write to us, CHOICE awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner receives *The Australian Green Consumer Guide*, or any other book of his choice from the list on choice.com.au/books. We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract.



Email letters@choice.com.au or send mail to:
Letters, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204

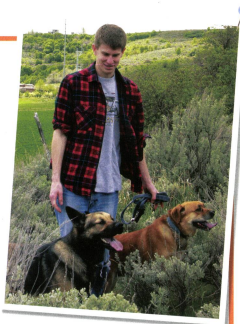


PHOTO COURTESY OF FRANZ



Recycled drinking water: myths and facts

Recycling our waste water for drinking could help with water shortages, but are there any truths in the dirty name-calling?

nutshell

- ▶ Recycling waste water for drinking is going ahead in SE Queensland, being trialled in Perth, and being considered by Goulburn.
- ▶ If managed carefully, recycling water for drinking could significantly reduce water shortages.

Here's where Australia is at. Toowoomba residents voted down a proposal to recycle waste water for drinking in 2006, with 62% opposed. Taking this message on board, Goulburn in NSW is undertaking lengthy community consultation on all its water management options. A recycled water option is on the table that could contribute up to half the area's water needs, but so far 41% of people surveyed considered the proposal undesirable.

Recycling isn't going ahead in Toowoomba itself, but the Queensland government did come to regard it as the only choice for securing the water supply in neighbouring south-east Queensland, and Toowoomba will be connected to that scheme by late 2009. The Queensland scheme, which includes Brisbane, is one of the largest of its type in the world.

Canberra has, for now, stopped short of recycling water to supplement its drinking water supply, although it was one option during recent community consultations. Instead, last October the ACT Government approved the design of a water recycling demonstration project. Wastewater will be recycled to drinking quality, but used for research and monitoring purposes — the recycled water won't be added to drinking water supplies.

There's high support for using recycled water on parks and gardens, but why doesn't it carry over to drinking it? The debate has been heated in Australia over whether we can safely drink recycled water. In this article we sort some recycled water myths from facts.

Jargonbuster @!?

Potable water Water intended for human consumption — suitable on the basis of both health and aesthetic considerations for drinking or culinary purposes.

Indirect potable reuse The discharge of recycled water into groundwater (called **managed aquifer recharge**) or surface water to supplement drinking water supply, rather than going directly from the treatment plant to your tap.

Recycled water Water that's been reclaimed from sewage, greywater or stormwater systems and treated to a standard that's appropriate for its intended use.

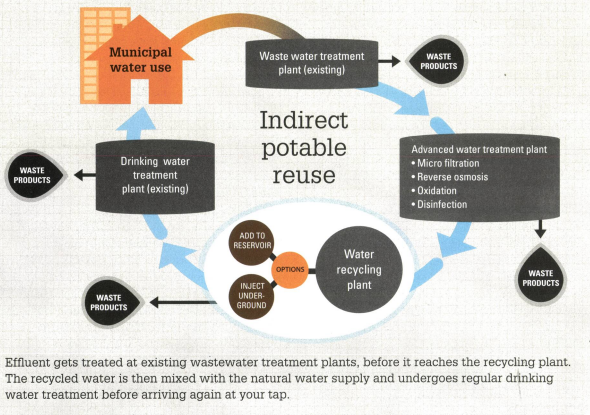
Reverse osmosis An advanced method of wastewater treatment that works by forcing water molecules across a semi-permeable membrane to separate it from impurities.

Sewage Material from internal household and other building drains. It includes faecal waste and urine from toilets; shower and bath water; laundry water and kitchen waste. (**Sewerage** is the network of pipes and infrastructure that transport the sewage.)

Water recycling This means water reclamation and reuse.



The recycling process



There is high support for recycled water for use on parks and gardens, but why doesn't it carry over to drinking it?

ILLUSTRATION: CYNTHIA KEE

What exactly is recycled water?

Water recycling is the process of taking effluent (wastewater and sewage) and treating it to a level that's appropriate for its intended use. For potable (drinkable) use, the recycled water has to be treated to a sufficiently high level, so that it's suitable for human consumption. The *indirect* potable reuse process being implemented in south-east Queensland, trialled in Perth and under discussion in Goulburn adds another step: highly treated recycled water is mixed with other water supplies above or below ground before it arrives at your tap (see *Jargon buster*, left).

There's no standard 'off the shelf' recycling project — each one is unique, with different specific technologies and very diverse natural water catchment characteristics — but generally speaking indirect potable reuse involves a number of steps.

- After going through micro filters, the water undergoes a reverse osmosis process, which involves forcing the water molecules across a dense plastic film. The water can pass through the film, but other molecules, including viruses, bacteria and even tiny salt molecules, can't.

- As an added precaution the water then undergoes oxidation and disinfection, using hydrogen peroxide and very strong ultraviolet light.
- The recycled water is then added to a reservoir or groundwater aquifer, where it can be stored and blended with the regular water supply.
- Before being put into the drinking water system, the blended recycled and regular water also undergoes the normal drinking water treatment process.

There's a difference between this kind of planned reuse — with advanced water treatment and risk management — and incidental water reuse. In some river systems, towns upstream discharge their treated sewage into the river and towns further downstream draw water from the same river.

For example, people living in towns that draw water from the Murrumbidgee below Canberra, and then down the Murray to Adelaide, are already partly reusing water. Even the city of London is located downstream from a number of wastewater treatment plants that discharge into the Thames, so part of its water supplies also reuse water. And Sydney's water supply receives some treated sewage from Goulburn and Lithgow. This water goes >

The multi-barrier approach used in producing recycled drinking water means that sewage affecting the end product is unlikely.

< through the regular water treatment system and is considered perfectly fit to drink.

With national guidelines on recycling water for drinking likely to be finalised in April, greater expansion of water recycling is anticipated over the longer term. The aim of the guidelines is to make sure recycling is done safely, without being sidetracked by whether recycling is a good or bad idea. The guidelines will explain what the risks are, and how to manage them. Decision makers and project managers should use the guidelines when assessing and carrying out projects.

So are the recycling myths true?

"Adding it to the environment improves it"

Most schemes add recycled water to a river, underground aquifer or reservoir (in Queensland's case the Wivenhoe dam). The step has been dubbed 'the miracle mile' and 'shandying' — but it works and it's how indirect potable reuse will occur in Australia. Overseas, Namibia is unique in directly reusing its recycled water — meaning that the recycled water is put into the drinking water pipes. (See *What's the bigger*

scene?, right, for more examples of recycled water schemes around the world.)

It might simply be because of the obvious dilution it receives, but Australians are much more comfortable with recycling if the process includes a natural environmental stage combined with the thorough treatment given to the rest of the water supply.

There's a less obvious reason too. Authorities tweak water treatment operations for our existing water supply, depending on the particular qualities of the water coming downstream. So putting the recycled water into the main water supply adds another safety buffer, because it provides time to identify and respond to blips in water quality.

"It's not clean: you'd be drinking sewage"

The yuck factor is a key reason people oppose recycling wastewater for drinking. However, experts say the perception simply doesn't match reality. By the time recycled water has passed through all the treatment processes it's cleaner than regular drinking water and has less 'taste', because it has fewer impurities. In fact, it's of such a high standard that, theoretically, it could be used in hospitals for kidney dialysis.

Schemes under consideration in Australia would treat the wastewater at regular sewage treatment plants before it arrives at the recycling plant (see the diagram of the recycling process, page 13). So treated domestic and industrial wastewater going into the recycling plants would already be more than 99% water. Some experts have raised legitimate concerns about the fact that wastewater also contains contaminants of organic material (pool), viruses and bacteria, detergents, grease and oil, salts, nutrients, organic chemicals, metals and other inorganic chemicals. Where we do recycle our wastewater, it's clearly important that these health risks are managed well. The recycled water guidelines are being developed with them front-of-mind, so that the recycling process is designed to remove them.

The multi-barrier approach used in producing recycled drinking water means that sewage contamination of the end product is unlikely. The idea is that even if there's a fault at one stage, the next will be there to remove the contaminants. For example, if there's a fault with one of the membranes in the reverse osmosis process and unwanted molecules slip through, many will be removed or destroyed by the hydrogen peroxide and ultraviolet light used in the next stage of the process.

Did you know ?

- Residents in some newer housing developments have two sets of water pipes — one for drinking water and a purple set for recycled water (see right), used for things like washing the car, watering the garden and toilet flushing. In two homes in Newington, Sydney, these pipes were cross-connected, meaning the residents were inadvertently drinking recycled water. It was up to four years before the mistake was discovered, following a complaint about the taste of the water. The recycled water in purple pipes isn't intended for drinking purposes — it tastes salty because it's recycled to a significantly lower standard than water produced by indirect potable reuse. Even so, no health problems were reported. All 1500 houses in Newington had their connections inspected. New homes now have an inspection by a licensed plumber. New residents in old homes are advised just to check the official inspection tag on their recycled water meter.
- Two years ago a newspaper reported that an Australian government agency had lead and other metals contaminating its recycled drinking water supply. The system was disconnected and thankfully the staff checked out OK. But the report had described the water as 'recycled', when in fact the agency used a rainwater tank. And it wasn't the case that tank water in general is unsafe, but that lead, copper and zinc were present in that particular water collection area. This case goes to show that careful installation and maintenance of any water supply system is crucial — as is accurate reporting.



What's the bigger scene?

This map shows examples of recycled water initiatives worldwide; it's far from an exhaustive list.



- **California:** Managed aquifer recharge since 1976 in Orange County.
- **Arizona:** Managed aquifer recharge since early 1990s in Scottsdale.
- **North Virginia:** Reservoir augmentation since 1978.



- **Namibia:** Direct reuse since 1968 and upgraded in 2002 in Windhoek.
- **Belgium:** Managed aquifer recharge since 2002 in Veurne-Ambacht (also prevents saltwater intrusion into ground drinking water).



- **Singapore:** Reservoir augmentation since 2003.
- **Perth:** Trialling managed aquifer recharge (2005–2008).
- **SE Queensland:** Reservoir augmentation (in construction, ready late 2008).
- **Goulburn:** Considering reservoir augmentation via wetlands.

The likelihood of contamination is further reduced by having a series of membranes, conducting frequent maintenance, and a set of extra barriers when the water reaches the regular drinking water treatment plant (for example, lime is often added to reduce trace amounts of metals).

"Recycled water turns men into women"

Micro pollutants are a legitimate concern, because we're putting an increasing mix of chemicals into our water systems. These include detergents, personal care products, antibiotics, hormones, insecticides and chemicals that make plastic soft (plasticisers).

The Toowoomba and south-east Queensland campaigns against the introduction of recycled water argued that it had the ability to change the sex of fish.

But experts say that evidence of harm to human health — let alone sex change — isn't supported by strong scientific evidence. The fear of feminisation comes from studies of fish swimming in sewage that hadn't been completely treated, and can't be simply translated to humans and highly treated recycled water.

Experts say there's no evidence that recycled water contains dangerous levels of hormones. Conventional sewage treatment processes in Australia remove 95–99% of hormones and the potable recycling process, particularly the reverse osmosis stage, can then remove the remainder of trace hormones to below the limit of detection.

All this emphasises again the importance of caution: multiple barriers in the treatment process, water quality testing, monitoring and research. The draft recycled water guidelines include quality criteria for pharmaceuticals and other chemicals of concern. >

There's no evidence that recycled water contains dangerous levels of hormones.



TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

How acceptable would it be to you, if government proposed the introduction of recycled water for drinking? In our online poll at choice.com.au the results, with 198 votes, were (as at 24 January 2008):

- 46% highly acceptable.
- 37% acceptable.
- 6% unacceptable.
- 8% highly unacceptable.
- 3% don't know.

The sticking point with recycled water is community acceptance and trust in authorities, not the science or feasibility.

A matter of trust

Sydneysider Chris lived and worked in Singapore for nearly 10 years, during the time recycled water for drinking was introduced there. He travelled a lot in the region for work and Singapore was one of the few Asian countries where he could drink water straight from the tap.

He recalls the Singaporean government having a publicity campaign about NEWater. Just like in Australia, there was community concern that it would mean 'drinking toilet water'. In the end, in Singapore, they didn't wait to win over the public — they just did it.

Chris couldn't taste a difference. For everyday use a small proportion of the recycled water is pumped into reservoirs and mixed with regular water, before being sent to people's taps. The treated water direct from the recycling plant is perfectly drinkable — even the Prime Minister drank it, for the cameras. The remainder of the recycled water is used for industrial purposes.

The issue, Chris reckons, is how much people trust governments to make sure their drinking water is safe. He says he's comfortable with the idea of drinking recycled water in Australia. He thinks people need to understand where water comes from now, and all the things that already ultimately get filtered out — like kangaroo poo from around Sydney's Warragamba dam. It all gets taken out, which is what water treatment is all about.



< "It's cheaper so it must be poor quality"

In fact, a lot of Singapore's recycled water gets used for electronic-chip manufacturing, which demands higher-quality water than drinking water.

It's true that when recycled water is provided for non-drinking purposes it's sometimes offered at a discount, but quality isn't the chief reason. The price was set lower when these schemes were introduced, to encourage people to use recycled water.

But as with any water, recycled supplies can't be regarded as an unlimited resource; they need demand management too. It costs money to produce recycled water, so in future its price is likely to more closely reflect this cost.

"Recycling uses a lot of energy"

This is no myth. It does take a lot of energy to make

each litre of recycled water, and even more to add it to a reservoir — for example, pumping it from the coast to a dam that's inland and uphill. It will also take a lot of energy to build new infrastructure for the recycled water schemes. However, other strategies for increasing water supply — such as desalination, which involves treating seawater by reverse osmosis to make it suitable for drinking — can use even more and could therefore be more costly.

That said, Australia needs a number of strategies working together to overcome water shortages — for example, water conservation measures, evaporation control, rainwater tanks, groundwater recharge and efficient appliances. In south-east Queensland, desalination and recycled water are expected to eventually contribute over half the total water supply. But, of course, for inland centres desalination of seawater isn't a viable solution. ■

CHOICE verdict

Any problems with recycled water are really not about the science or the engineering feasibility — these have already been proven. The sticking point is community acceptance and trust in authorities. The national guidelines for recycled water for drinking will be an important step. There also needs to be the flexibility to update and strengthen water management requirements as more is learnt.

Recycled water is coming to Queensland and there are likely to be more projects on the way. Since the decision to go ahead with indirect potable reuse, a Water Commission survey has shown 74% of south-east Queenslanders are supportive of the scheme. On the other hand, a survey conducted by opponents showed 90% were against it — although only 1.5% of people invited to respond to that survey did so.

Recycled water through indirect potable reuse can be an important addition to the water supply. Don't get too excited — it's unlikely to eliminate water restrictions — but on the bright side it should stop them getting worse.



Nothing to crow about

Thirty years of intensive farming practices mean expensive organic and free-range chickens don't taste any better than a standard factory chook.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE ROSS

nutshell

- Paying extra for an organic or free-range chicken may have other benefits, but it won't necessarily buy you a tastier chook to roast for dinner.
- Free-range and organic chickens are reared with more space and access to the open air, but these differences aren't enough to give them more flavour.

For a special family occasion there's nothing like a roast chicken dinner with baked pumpkin and crunchy roast potatoes. So what's the tastiest chicken? Do the more expensive organic and free-range chooks really taste better than standard factory-farmed ones?

To find out, CHOICE bought the different brands and types of chicken widely available in the big supermarkets. A chef roasted the chickens and we asked four food experts (see *Meet the experts*, page 18) to tell us how they rated for flavour.

Finger lickin' chicken?

There were eight chickens: two organic, two free-range, one corn-fed and three regular factory-farmed birds (for details of brands and prices, see the table on page 19).

The result was unexpected: there was no significant difference between the scores for free-range or organic chickens and factory-farmed birds. No brand or type stood out as specially tasty; in fact there was general agreement among the experts at the end of the test that, "None of them tasted much like the roast chicken that mother used to cook for us when we were kids."

Did you know?

Hormones and antibiotics The claim that chickens are fed growth hormones is a furphy — the practice has been banned since the 1960s. But factory chickens are routinely fed antibiotics for disease prevention — and it so happens that antibiotics can also make the birds grow faster.

The industry claims (correctly) that there's no antibiotic residue in the meat, but the real issue is that of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Chickens carry bacteria such as *E. coli*, salmonella and enterococci. Natural selection ensures that these bacteria develop resistance to antibiotics when they're used over time, and CHOICE testing in 2002 found antibiotic-resistant bacteria in more than 10% of chickens. These bacteria inevitably spread to humans, contributing to the ongoing problem of reduced effectiveness of life-saving antibiotics.

Two of the chooks divided the experts a bit, but not enough to single any brand out in the taste ratings. Two experts found the most expensive chicken in our test, INGLEWOOD FARMS Organic, "dry and unappealing", whereas the others quite liked it. The STEGGLES Corn Fed chicken polarised the tasters the most; they either found it "flavourous and very tender" or thought it had "no real chicken flavour" and questioned whether it had been "pumped up with something".

Our chef didn't season the chickens at all, whereas most people use salt, pepper, butter, paprika or other herbs and spices on the bird itself, and add still more flavour with stuffing. (See page 19 for *Cooking the very best roast chicken*.) Left to its own devices, chicken meat — no matter where it comes from — doesn't seem to stack up to much.

All in all, it doesn't seem to matter what chicken you buy from a supermarket: follow your conscience and go for free-range or organic, or save money on a standard chook — they all taste much the same. And there's a reason for this...

Fast and ... faster food

When you look at what's happened to chicken farming over the last 30 years it's easy to see why a roast chicken isn't quite like it used to be. Chickens have been genetically selected for faster and more efficient conversion of feed into meat. So successful has this been that the time taken to produce a chook weighing 2 kg has been essentially halved, from more than 70 days to around 40. But this emphasis on rapid growth has caused significant differences between [meat chickens (the industry calls them "broilers") and other breeds and strains (such as those used for egg production)]. >

Meet the experts



Sydney Pemberton

Syd runs Pemberton's Food Workshop in Sydney, where she gives demonstration cooking classes for adults and children. She's the author of *How to Clean Practically Anything*, published by CHOICE Books.



Kim Coverdale

Kim is food editor of *Super Food Ideas*. Prior to that, she was deputy food editor of *Woman's Day* and *New Idea*.



Debbie Solomon

Debbie is an Asian food specialist who organises and runs food tours of Sydney's markets and more colourful food locations.



Dave Kaszoroski

Dave has been both a butcher and a chef. He runs Eumundi Smokehouse in Sydney, where he makes traditional charcuterie products using recipes inherited from his Russian grandfather.



THE FRENCH HAVE A WORD FOR IT

In France you're almost guaranteed a tasty roast chicken if you buy a Label Rouge bird at your local supermarché (though at twice the price of an ordinary broiler).

The Label Rouge system imposes strict standards: the birds are free-range and there are special dietary requirements. But the key factor in producing the flavour is the use of traditional breeds of chook that grow much more slowly than birds that have been bred for factory farming. Label Rouge chickens must grow for at least 81 days before slaughter, whereas in Australia even organic chickens might only live for 63 days.

Nowadays all the commercial meat birds are from much the same fast-maturing genetic stock.

< Broilers (no matter whether they're free-range, organic or otherwise) have a lot more breast muscle, which puts mechanical stresses on legs and hip joints, and accelerated skeletal growth causes more frequent bone disorders. Not surprisingly in view of this, broilers are much less active than laying hens, spending less time walking, scratching and flapping their wings. All this affects the quality of the meat — slower-growing birds that have a longer life span and also those given the time to reach a bigger ultimate size have more flavour.

Chooks on parade

Given little difference in flavour, you might want to base your decision about what chook to buy on ethics instead — here's how the different types of chicken are raised.

Factory farming The industry boasts the birds aren't caged like laying hens, but they still don't get much room to move. They're confined in sheds with less space per bird than the area of one page of CHOICE magazine.

Chicken meat produced by this system is certainly cheap, and the birds are protected from predators and heat and cold. But animal welfare organisations say the system is cruel. The birds are stressed by the unnatural environment where they can't scratch, dust-bathe and stretch their wings; and they can suffer chronic pain and lameness because of their rapid growth. They're housed on litter, but the sheds aren't cleaned until the fully grown chooks are taken for 'processing'. The high ammonia levels from this accumulation of chook poo can cause eye, skin and respiratory problems in the animals.

Corn-fed These differ from regular factory chickens only in that they're fed a high-corn diet instead of the usual mix of grains and legumes. Some people prefer the flavour of corn-fed chooks. The flesh and fat are slightly yellow, which some find disconcerting at first.

Free-range This system involves efficiency compromises over factory farming, to provide a better environment for the birds. Free-range chooks may get more space in the shed and are allowed to forage outside in a more natural environment (though they don't necessarily take advantage of it, or get much food from the sometimes overused ground).

Organic Organic chickens are also free-range, but there are additional requirements: the birds have even more space than free-range chooks when they're confined in sheds, and most of the diet must be from feed produced by organic methods (so this should exclude genetically modified (GM) corn and GM soya bean meal).

HOW WE TESTED

A chef cooked the chickens, without seasoning or stuffing them. They were identified only by a number on a metal tag attached securely to a leg, so the expert tasters didn't know the brand or type of chicken they were eating.

Each taster was served a portion of breast and leg meat with a plain green salad and slices of baguette for cleansing the palate between samples. We asked the tasters to separately rate the breast and leg meat for aroma, texture, flavour and overall impression on a five-point scale.



BRAND (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)	TYPE	PRICE PER KG (\$)
Ingham	Broiler	3.99
Inglewood Farms Organic	Organic	12.50
Lilydale Free-Range	Free-range	7.26
Steggles	Broiler	4.27
Steggles Corn Fed	Corn fed	5.99
Woolworths Free Range	Free-range	6.49
Woolworths Organic	Organic	9.99
You'll Love Coles	Broiler	5.09

Coming home to roost

Our test results are in line with much bigger trials overseas. Research in the US found no significant differences between the quality of the meat (breast and leg) from broilers and free-range birds. A European study, which looked at responses from 100 ordinary consumers, also found no difference between the characteristics of organic and broiler chicken breast meat. Yet you'll often see claims that free-range and organic meat tastes better. What's the story? There are several factors.

The feed the chooks get can affect the flavour. But the free-range and organic birds from the big producers often don't get much from their outdoor scratching (the grass gets exhausted pretty fast); most of their food is the same mixture of grains as is used for raising broilers.

The age of the bird Commercial free-range chickens aren't necessarily slaughtered later than broilers (35–55 days). And the lifespan of organic choos is only a little longer — the standards specify that organic meat chickens must be grown to maturity over a period of 63–80 days. Unfortunately the longer the birds live the more likely they'll suffer from bone and joint abnormalities.

The breed of chicken can influence the quality and flavour of the meat. In the past many different breeds were raised for meat; now all commercial meat birds — broilers, free-range and organic alike — are from much the same fast-maturing genetic stock.

The free-range, organic and broiler birds from big producers are now so alike any differentiation and competition is dead, to the detriment of consumers and, ultimately, the industry. As one of our experts said of the industry, "They need to take a close look at themselves!"

If flavour is of paramount importance to you, try to find a small producer who uses traditional breeds and lets them live longer. Failing that, the best you can do is buy the biggest chicken you can find — the bigger it is, the longer it's lived and likely the better the flavour. ■

COOKING THE VERY BEST ROAST CHICKEN

Here's the way to cook the perfect roast chicken, from CHOICE's home economist:

- Preheat the oven to 200°C (180°C if it's fan-forced).
- Carefully lift the breast skin away from the flesh of the chicken and place knobs of butter under the skin. Cut a lemon in half and put both halves in the cavity. Rub the skin with butter and season with salt and pepper.
- Truss the chicken (tie its legs together and make sure the wings are tucked under). Place the chicken breast-side up on a rack, in a shallow roasting pan with water.
- Cook for about 30 minutes per 500 g of chicken. Shield any areas that are cooking faster than others (such as wings and drumsticks, even sometimes the breast) with foil.
- To test if the chicken is ready, insert a skewer into the thickest part of the thigh. If the juices run clear with no sign of pink, the chicken is cooked.
- Cover the chicken loosely with foil and set it aside to rest for 5–10 minutes before carving it or cutting it into pieces to serve. (This is your opportunity to turn the oven temperature up high for some really crunchy roast potatoes.)



All in all, it doesn't seem to matter whether you spend \$8 or \$25 on a chicken — they all taste much the same.



Switch services and save

CHOICE's guide to getting the most out of banks, credit cards and insurance. With interest rates going up, you'll benefit from the money you save.

nutshell

- The best accounts pay 7% per year interest or more for your savings.
- Credit cards with interest-free days and no annual fee are available.
- An annual insurance review could save you hundreds of dollars.

Rising inflation, interest rates and high property prices mean that, for most of us, minimising the cost of 'staple' financial services like bank accounts and insurance is important. And when some of these services are virtually identical — apart from their cost — why wouldn't you go for the cheapest option?

Well, one answer is because of the difficulty of changing. Flicking your bank account is harder than it should be — Australia lags behind other countries in that respect. That's why CHOICE pushed for the introduction of more efficient and low-cost switching processes, expected later this year.

But even taking the hassle factor into account, CHOICE members told us it's well worth switching banks and credit cards for better fees, interest rates and service. And switching your insurance policy is easy, and could save you hundreds of dollars each year.

The Reserve Bank of Australia increased its cash rate by 0.25% on 5 February, and that followed two hikes in 2007. While rate increases spell bad news for borrowers, the flip side is that savers should benefit. If your savings account or term deposit doesn't measure up to the best, now's a good time to reassess your finances and switch to a better deal.

Steps for changing your everyday bank transaction account

1 Find a better account — not easy, with hundreds of options on the market. However, past CHOICE studies found the difference between the best and worst accounts for representative scenarios was hundreds of dollars each year. *Worth a look*, right, has some ideas.

2 Open the new account. You'll need to provide 100 points of identification (such as your passport, driver's licence, council rates notice, birth certificate, credit or debit cards, phone, electricity or gas account, marriage certificate, etc).

3 Redirect automatic payments, such as your salary and direct debits. For the time being you need to rearrange direct debits yourself, in writing — a pretty archaic system soon to be brought into the 21st century. See *CHOICE verdict*, page 23, for more on this. You should also write to the merchant.

4 Close the old account. But beware: penalty fees of up to \$50 may be charged if payments from your old account are dishonoured because it has insufficient funds. Make sure the old account is open and has enough money in it until all payments are confirmed as redirected.

Worth the hassle

For Alice and Nick from Sydney, shutting down their old account with ANZ was harder than opening the new one with HSBC. "It took three weeks to close the account," Alice says. "ANZ required a face-to-face meeting, and later made three phone calls to try to get us back."

Still, Alice says the hassle of changing direct debit arrangements and remembering new PINs and passwords was worth it. "I'd been with ANZ since uni because the account was fee-free for students. But when a \$6 monthly fee was introduced, I realised switching to HSBC's account with no monthly fee would save me over \$70 per year. The disadvantage was there weren't as many HSBC ATMs around, but you get a certain number of free withdrawals from other banks' ATMs each month."

After about a year, Alice and Nick decided to switch again, because of HSBC's penalty fees and a bad service experience. "We had obtained a bank cheque to buy a car," Alice says. "It turned out that the vendor's name was misspelt on the cheque. We went to the bank to replace it — and were charged \$8 to cancel the old cheque and \$8 again for the new one."

The couple decided to leave. They chose FIRE BRIGADES EMPLOYEES' Credit Union, which they'd heard good things about from friends. "You can do most transactions online and there are no account-keeping fees," says Alice. Her advice is to switch if you're not happy with your current arrangements. "There are lots of bank accounts with no monthly fees and credit cards with no annual fees. It's worth changing even though it can be a hassle."

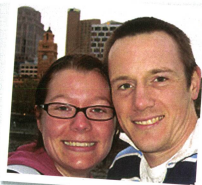


PHOTO COURTESY OF ALICE

Everyday transaction accounts

Australian households pay billions of dollars in bank fees annually. Most everyday transaction accounts pay little or no interest. And customers are often dissatisfied with the service they receive. These are three compelling reasons to change. For how to go about it, see *Steps*, left.

★ Worth a look

No-fee interest-paying transaction accounts

- **BANKWEST's Hero** account pays 5% pa on balances up to \$5000 (but no interest on balances above that — the idea is you'd divert them to a high-interest savings account). There are a few catches with this account: for example, you must deposit at least \$2000 each month. Similar to all banks, you're charged to use other banks' ATMs (except BANKWEST-affiliated banks), and while all financial institutions charge penalty fees, BANKWEST's are among the highest. Its dishonour fee (\$50) is higher than most banks, and it charges \$45 each time you overdraw your account, up to a maximum of \$135 per day.
- **HSBC's Online Savings** account pays 5.35% on balances over \$5000 (0.5% on the first \$4999). There's no account fee. A \$2 fee is charged if you use a non-HSBC ATM more than five times a month.
- **MEMBERS EQUITY's InterestME** is a combined transaction and savings account. There's no account fee and most transactions are free. ATM withdrawals cost \$1. Interest at 6.75% is paid on balances above \$3000, below this 0.25%.

Flat-fee accounts Many financial institutions offer accounts with unlimited transactions, excluding "foreign" ATM withdrawals, for a monthly fee of around \$5.

Mutual societies Past CHOICE surveys found higher satisfaction levels among credit union customers, compared with banks. And more recently, in July 2007, Roy Morgan Research found:

- The banking sector lagged well behind building societies and credit unions for customer satisfaction (both scored 87.9%).
- 73% of banks' customers are satisfied (an average figure for all banks).
- The lowest satisfaction: Commonwealth Bank (68.2%).
- The highest: Bendigo Bank (90.5%).

Smarter use of your existing account Cut your fees by avoiding withdrawals from others banks' ATMs and sticking to the free transactions allowed each month.

Savings accounts

The best savings accounts from banks, building societies and credit unions now pay around 7%. You need to compare interest rates (if you're a CHOICE Online member, check out the calculator at choice.com.au) and open a new savings account, while keeping your existing transaction account for everyday banking.

★ Worth a look

Internet savings The table, page 22, shows internet accounts that pay at least 7% on the full balance of the account. Some have this level of interest for an introductory period only; the table has details. Internet savings accounts generally don't offer facilities like ATMs or internet bill payments (although some do). You generally link the online account to your everyday account (which can be with a different institution), transferring money in and out whenever you like. >

Even taking the hassle factor into account, it's well worth switching banks and credit cards for better fees, interest rates and service.

THE FINAL STRAW

Phillip and Kathryn from Sydney switched from the COMMONWEALTH to BENDIGO BANK after receiving poor service and advice. They had paid off two loans with the COMMONWEALTH for their residential and investment properties. The bank retained the deeds to facilitate any further loans. Phillip and Kathryn later approached the bank for a \$30,000 loan for house repairs and improvements.

"The branch lending manager suggested that because it was 'such a small loan' we should put it on our credit cards at the prevailing rate," says Phillip. "She complained that setting up this small loan would cause her a lot of work."

Phillip and Kathryn were incensed. "The lending manager said the bank just wanted to protect us so that we wouldn't get in debt over our heads, but we had \$2.5 million of unencumbered assets with the bank and were virtually debt-free," Phillip says.

After advice from a friend, they talked to BENDIGO BANK. "We met the manager on day one, were introduced to all the staff, and their banking procedures were explained to us — including the best ways to minimise fees and use debit cards. We got our loan and overdraft facility and there've been no glitches. I can't recommend BENDIGO enough."

Carrying a credit card debt from month to month is one of the most expensive ways of borrowing money.

< Regular savings BANKWEST's Regular Saver account pays 8% on balances up to \$6000. To get that rate, each month you must deposit between \$50 and \$500 and make no withdrawals (if you do, you get no interest that month). The account is only available to customers with an eligible BANKWEST everyday account.

Mortgage offsets If you have a home loan, consider directing your salary and savings into a linked offset account. Its balance reduces your home loan for interest calculations. For example, if your home loan is \$300,000 and you have \$10,000 in the offset account, mortgage interest is calculated on \$290,000. This effectively 'earns' interest at your mortgage rate (typically 8.5% pa or higher) and you don't pay income tax on this interest 'earned'. However, watch for offset fees and loan interest rates; weigh up these costs and benefits.

Credit cards

You can get a competitive interest rate, interest-free days and no annual fee, all on the same card.

Changing your credit card is much like switching bank accounts (see *Steps 1-4*, page 20). Once you've chosen one, apply for it. You'll need to provide

identification, and the application form requires plenty of details about your income, job, other debts — and the financial institution will do a credit check too (it's worth knowing that too many credit applications can affect your credit rating). When the new card comes through, make sure you notify all the organisations that take direct debits from your old card — check your old statements for regular payments. Finally, cancel your old card.

★ Worth a look

If you always pay on time More than 10 cards have no annual fee and offer a decent number of interest-free days (at least 14 after the statement is produced, or up to 55 interest-free days on some purchases — if you pay your bill on time, otherwise interest is backdated). The lowest-interest ones are:

- POLICE CREDIT UNION (10.49%).
- AUSTRAL CREDIT UNION (10.60%).
- NSW TEACHERS CREDIT UNION (11.50%).
- VIRGIN MONEY (12.99%).

If you never pay on time or in full Carrying a card debt from month to month is one of the most expensive ways of borrowing money, and interest rates have been creeping up. Try to clear this debt as quickly as possible:

- At the very least, make the minimum monthly payment to avoid late payment fees.
- Avoid using the card for new transactions — interest may apply on them from day one. Use a debit card instead, where you can only spend what's in your account.
- Consider switching to a card that charges no interest on balance transfers for the first six months. It means you'll stop paying interest on the old debt you transfer into it, allowing you to pay it off faster. There are traps, though: if you don't clear the debt in the intro period it could be a bad deal, new transactions may attract interest from day one and you still need to pay the monthly minimum to avoid penalties.
- Another option is to consolidate your debts into a single loan, and pay it off fast.

If you occasionally pay late or not in full As well as choosing a card with a low interest rate, low annual fee and a good number of interest-free days, bear in mind that the way the company calculates interest can have a big impact too. When we checked last year, we found that the fairest card providers are BANK OF QUEENSLAND, BENDIGO BANK and particularly NSW TEACHERS CREDIT UNION, which has no annual fee, up to 55 interest-free days on purchases, and an 11.5% interest rate.

If you make a lot of international transactions, the WIZARD Clear Advantage MasterCard has no fee for overseas or foreign currency purchases. Most companies charge 2%.

INTERNET SAVINGS ACCOUNTS PAYING 7%+ INTEREST

Institution and account	Annual interest rate (%)	Website
BankWest TeleNet Saver	7.20 (B)	www.abetterdeal.com.au
Railways Credit Union Express Saver (A)	7.00	www.railwayscreditunion.com.au
St George DragonDirect Directsaver	7.00 (C)	www.dragondirect.com.au

Source: Calculator at choice.com.au, with data sourced from Cannex, 11 January 2008.

(A) Available to current and former rail employees and their families. (B) 7.2% for the first year, then the rate drops to 6.75%. (C) Introductory rate; drops to 6.5% on 30 June 2008. Account must be opened by 31 March.

Combine insurance for discounts

Christine from SA had her car, home and caravan policies with different insurers, but checked out the benefits of consolidating with one company.

"Overall, we were spending almost \$1300 each year for the three policies," Christine says. "APIA gives a 5% discount on all policies if you have more than one policy with them."

Although the caravan insurance was dearer with APIA, all up Christine saved by switching. "Even though we only saved \$146 a year, the money is better in our pocket than someone else's," she says. However, she notes that the APIA car insurance doesn't give free windscreen cover, unlike her old RAA policy — you need to check policy differences when making your decision.

(APIA policies — previously known as Australian Pensioners Insurance Agency — are only available to certain people over 50.)



CHOICE wants a payments system whereby the financial institution you're leaving is obliged to help you change your direct debits.

Insurance

Compare policies at each renewal; check CHOICE Best Buys and recommended policies to save money and ensure good cover. It's fairly simple: you'll need to check prices with a few companies to find the best value and it's also worth reading a few policies (they're accessible on the companies' websites) to ensure you get suitable cover. Then, once the new insurance is set up, make sure any direct debit payment arrangements with your old insurance company have been cancelled.

Differences between premium costs that we've found over the past year for different types of insurance give an indication of the possible savings:

Car CHOICE's buying guide in the November 2007 issue found the differences between the lowest and highest quotes from insurers were, on average, \$2230 for young drivers, \$315 for adults and \$340 for older drivers.

Home We found the annual premium differences between the cheapest and dearest insurers was \$280 for defined-events home cover and \$190 for contents. Some companies offer better protection against underinsurance: AAMI and COMMINSURE cover the total cost of rebuilding your home, while GIO, SUNCORP and RACT pay up to 25%–30% more than you were covered for, if you're underinsured. TIO may offer an extra 30% in addition to your sum insured, under certain conditions.

1.8 million direct debits made every day.
four million direct credits every day.
And automatic payments are increasing.

Health CHOICE Best Buys save you, on average, \$540 to \$710 each year, depending on the cover and excess or co-payment chosen.

Travel Travel agents traditionally sold most policies, but this enabled them to get away with high prices. Some agents keep more than 50% of what you pay as their commission. You can pay less online, where some of the same policies are available for lower prices. Just make sure the cover is sufficient; there's a free guide about what to look for at choice.com.au.

Bundling for a discount We got conflicting reports from members about whether combining policies with one insurer saves money. Some, such as Christine, above, found that bundling was cheaper. Others found that switching between the best-value insurer at each renewal was better value, even after taking 'loyalty' discounts into account. While some insurers give discounts on their standalone policy prices to customers who have several policies with them, you might still be better off shopping around for each policy separately. Also ask your present insurer to match the best price you're quoted.

You can go to choice.com.au to find the latest CHOICE insurance Best Buys and to compare policies (free to CHOICE Online members; CHOICE magazine subscribers can upgrade for \$12.50 per quarter — see page 66). ■

CHOICE verdict

CHOICE welcomes Federal Government moves to make account switching easier for consumers. The government recently announced that from November this year, a listing and switching service will require your present bank, if requested, to give you a list of all your account's automatic debits and credits. You can take this list to the institution you want to switch to and it'll be required to help you to re-establish those automatic payments, taking a lot of the hassle out of switching.

This move follows a consultation by the Australian Payments Clearing Association. CHOICE's submission to the consultation paper is at www.choice.com.au.



Ready to drink?

Alcopops are the drink of choice for underage drinkers — their sweet flavours mask the taste of alcohol. Almost a third of CHOICE's teenage testers couldn't detect alcohol in a Vodka Mudshake.

nutshell

► Alcopops are very appealing to younger people, and contribute to underage and binge drinking. In CHOICE's trial, 24% of the 18–19-year-olds thought there was no alcohol in the alcopops they tasted.

► The regulation of alcopops marketing — and of alcohol more generally — doesn't effectively protect teenagers. Parents need to open communication and get involved.

Many health and advocacy groups are concerned about the influence of premixed alcohols — known as ready-to-drinks (RTDs) — on teenage alcohol use. An RTD is part spirit or wine and part non-alcoholic drink, such as milk or a soft drink, bought in a premixed format. They're also known as 'alcopops' or 'designer' drinks.

Research shows that alcopops are extremely popular with underage drinkers, and the drink of choice for underage binge drinkers. They're the most commonly consumed form of alcohol among 12–17-year-old girls, and have been described by industry and concerned groups alike as 'bridging' or 'gateway' beverages for less experienced drinkers, who aren't yet used to the taste of alcohol. Their popularity among younger teenagers has been attributed to their trendy packaging and sweet flavours, which can mask the taste of alcohol. As one journalist quipped, an alcopop is "a fizzy drink which allows alcohol to be introduced into the bloodstream while bypassing the taste buds".

With the above concerns in mind, we set out to find how easy it would be for young people (of drinking age, to keep it legal) to detect the presence of alcohol in alcopops and other alcoholic beverages, using a blind taste test that included a mixture of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. See *How we tested*, far right.



SENATE INQUIRY

As we were going to press, the Senate agreed to an inquiry to examine Australia's alcohol toll. The Senate's Standing Committee on Community Affairs will examine a bill (proposed by Family First) that would require health information labels on alcohol, ads for alcohol to be approved by a government body and TV ads to be restricted to 9 pm to 5 am. Submissions to the inquiry are invited, which will report by 18 June 2008.

'Do you think this contains alcohol?'

	YES (%)	NO (%)	UNSURE (%)
Alcopops (322)	69	24	7
Soft drinks (324)	9	85	5
Wine (81)	100	0	0
Beer (81)	100	0	0

The number in brackets is the number of times these drinks were tasted altogether.

As the table above shows, many of our teenage participants had difficulty detecting alcohol in the alcopops — only 69% thought they contained alcohol, compared with 100% correctly identifying the beer and wine as alcoholic drinks. Almost a quarter of the teenagers couldn't taste the alcohol in alcopops. They found it most difficult to identify it in Vodka Mudshake (which looks and tastes rather like a chocolate milkshake), particularly the males — only 51% thought this beverage contained alcohol. And these were 18 and 19-year-olds with some experience drinking alcohol; it's likely younger drinkers would find it even harder to tell.

According to one participant, "That's what these are great for — because they do taste like soft drink, it's good for kids that have no alcohol experience whatsoever, so they don't have to taste the alcohol and they don't realise how drunk they're getting."

And in terms of appeal, alcopops were the most popular alcoholic beverage in our trial — 60% of participants liked their taste (not far behind the 77% who liked the soft drinks), compared with 25% who liked wine and 38% beer. And they're even more appealing when you're younger, according to our 18–19-year-olds. Said one, "I used to drink all of these when I was a bit younger...Like when I was at school."

Alcopop producers use colours as shortcut cues to

HOW WE TESTED

78 teenagers aged 18 and 19 years old, roughly half of them male and half female, took part in our taste test of a range of drinks that included beer, white wine, four kinds of soft drink and four alcopops — 10 in total. Samples were unbranded and each participant received them in a different order. Each participant tasted all 10 samples.

- The alcopops used in the taste test were:
- Bacardi Breezer Raspberry (4.8% alcohol).
 - Ruski Lemon (4.8%).
 - Vodka Cruiser Passionfruit (5%).
 - Vodka Mudshake Original Chocolate (4%).

For each sample, participants were asked if they thought the drink contained alcohol, and whether they liked the taste and found its colour appealing. The teenagers also completed a survey about their drinking habits and awareness of alcohol advertising. Sixteen also took part in focus groups, discussing alcohol consumption in general, and alcopops more specifically.

flavour expectations — green for apple or lime, pink for guava and red for raspberry, for example. But colour itself is also a major part of the appeal of many alcopops for teenagers. An advertorial for Bacardi Breezer describes deep raspberry red as the “hot glamour colour this season” for nails, lips, heels and clutch bags, and goes on to say, “All you need to complete your hot, berry delicious look is another fashion accessory — the new Raspberry Bacardi Breezer.”

According to one of our teenage participants, “Wine obviously doesn’t have a good colour to it but you see some of these alcopops and you go ‘oh, it’s pink!’”

Hard sell on the hard stuff

Every day in Australia, young people are exposed to high and increasing levels of alcohol advertising and marketing, which research shows can have an influence on teenage drinking. 91% of our taste test participants recalled seeing alcohol advertising in the past month. The most recalled advertising was for beer at 43%, followed by alcopops, 16%. Most alcohol advertising was last seen on television, 71%, followed by billboards at 56%, pubs and clubs at 49%, bottle shops at 39%, magazines at 34% and 14% on the internet.

In relation to alcohol advertising, there are two complementary industry self-regulation codes: the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Advertiser Code of Ethics (which applies to all forms of advertising) and the Alcoholic Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC). In addition, many of the larger companies have their own marketing code of practice. The codes give guidelines for advertising with specific reference to

“That’s what these are great for — they taste like soft drink, so it’s good for kids with no alcohol experience.”



children and adolescents, but there are some gaps — a major one being the internet.

The ABAC extends to websites owned or endorsed by alcohol beverage brands. But at present there’s no stipulation as to what kinds of third-party site are deemed acceptable for online alcohol ads. And the youth-appealing internet is a surefire way of reaching a young audience. So while alcopop producers may argue they’re exclusively aiming at the 18–25-year-old market, it’s not surprising that the marketing still manages to reach millions of impressionable young teenagers.

We found promotions for alcoholic products, including the alcopop WKD (‘wicked’) Original Vodka Blue, for example, alongside promos for the latest teen movies and Nancy Drew games on girl.com.au — an online girls magazine that “addresses issues which face today’s youth”. This is at odds with the statement on the website of WKD drinks owner, Beverage Brands: “The marketing of our brands is strictly targeted at the 18-plus age group.” After CHOICE contacted WKD, the item was removed from the website.

Alcopop marketing in particular draws heavily on pop-culture references and young, hip images to create a sense of identity and individual style, clearly appealing to the young, fashion-conscious consumer. The producer of Vodka Cruiser, for example, describes its drinker as someone who “blends in with their peer group”. You’re invited to “get on and ride the wave with this bright, bubbly and fun brand”. And you’re assured that “Vodka Cruiser is still the fashion RTD for the 21st Century”.

Alcopop marketing cleverly uses the knowledge that young people today choose their drinks to reflect who >

“I used to drink all of these when I was a bit younger ... Like when I was at school” — one of our 18–19-year-old trialists.

Alcopops were the most popular alcoholic drink in our trial — 60% liked their taste, compared with 25% who liked wine and 38% beer.

< they are and who they want to be. As one of our female participants told us, "I think with girls, if they see another girl that's 18 or 17 [drinking alcopops], and they're 15 or 16, they think it's cute ... like the bottle."

How much are alcopops to blame?

It's clear from CHOICE'S test that the use of sweet flavours reduces the natural resistance many teenagers have to the strong and (to many of them) unpleasant taste of alcohol. In fact it's long been argued that alcopops entice youngsters to begin drinking at an earlier age and that they're associated with more frequent drinking and binge drinking in young people. And the way these products are marketed hardly deters young drinkers from aspiring to drink them.

According to data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the growth of this product category in the Australian market has been fast. Between 2004 and 2006 there was a 9% increase in the availability of alcopops, and estimated consumption of alcopops by people aged 15 and over increased by around 17%. Some studies have found alcopops to be partially responsible for the observed increase in total alcohol consumption in adolescents. Contrary to this, though, a recent review of the published literature on the impact of alcopops on adolescent drinking found that evidence for these associations is scarce.

Why it matters

In Australian society, drinking alcohol is part of the 'rite of passage' to adulthood and is an important part of the social life of many young people and adults. But levels of underage drinking are high. The most recent national survey of Australian secondary school students found that by the age of 13, 80% had tried alcohol. This number increased with age to around 86% of 14-year-olds and 96% of 17-year-olds. Ten per cent of 12-year-olds were current drinkers, meaning they'd drunk alcohol in the week prior to the survey, and this increased to reach a peak of 49% among 17-year-olds.

And it's not just their age; the way they're drinking is also a cause for concern. Around 20% of all 16- and 17-year-old students (and around 40% of current drinkers in these age groups) drank alcohol at risky levels — that's seven or more drinks in one day for males and five or more for females (usually referred to as binge drinking).

Why does it matter? Many people probably think experimenting with alcohol is a normal part of teenage development. However, apart from the risks associated with being drunk (such as accidents), there's a growing body of evidence that early onset of alcohol use, including binge drinking, puts you at increased risk of a range of problems later in life, including adult alcohol dependence, illicit drug use and psychiatric problems. ■

ADVICE FOR PARENTS

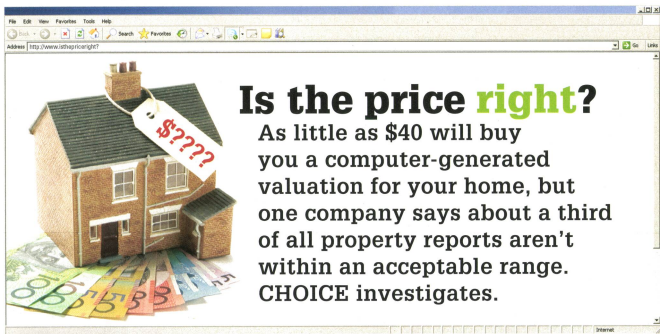
It's difficult for parents of young teenagers to know what approach to take with alcohol. Do you introduce your children to alcohol in an attempt to educate them to be discerning about drinking or, alternatively, encourage them not to use alcohol until they reach the legal age? Is it appropriate to provide your teenager with alcohol to take to a party? Is there something you can do to help your teenagers avoid alcohol-related harm?

Unfortunately, there's little in the way of official guidelines for parents to follow. However, a government report conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies concluded that there's a number of key messages for parents on the topic that might help. These include:

- Delaying the onset of alcohol use is associated with more moderate and less risky patterns of use in adulthood, while early onset is related to more risky patterns of use in the long term.
- Parental attitudes and norms towards alcohol can play a considerable role. For example, when parents showed disapproval of alcohol use, their children were less likely to use alcohol; conversely when parents were tolerant or permissive, their children were more likely to consume alcohol.
- Once teenagers have started drinking, enhanced parental monitoring appears to be a key factor in minimising risky alcohol use, although this first requires there to be good parent-teenager relationships — simply asking more questions of your teenager may be more damaging. Once a good relationship is in place, clear and consistent rules regarding alcohol use and maintaining open communication are key.

WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION

- DrinkWise Australia www.drinkwise.com.au.
- Drug Info Clearinghouse (Australian Drug Foundation) www.druginfo.adf.org.au.
- Living With Alcohol Program (Northern Territory Government) www.nt.gov.au/health/healthdev/aodp/wap/guide.shtml.
- Reach Out! <http://reachout.com.au>.
- The Salvation Army <http://salvos.org.au/need-help/the-facts/binge-drinking.php>.
- www.thinkbeforeyoudrink.com.au.



Is the price right?

As little as \$40 will buy you a computer-generated valuation for your home, but one company says about a third of all property reports aren't within an acceptable range. CHOICE investigates.

nutshell

► Different websites put a wide range of values on the same property, and can be way off the mark when compared to licensed valuations and actual sale prices.

► The reports can provide useful information and guidance, but you can't rely on their price estimations, as a substantial number are wrong — and you don't know which ones.

"Before you buy or sell property, find out its real value from the pros." "Get a current market price estimate as used by some of Australia's largest financial institutions." "Eliminate the guesswork."

These are some of the ways websites offering automated property valuations describe their offers. And there's no doubting their appeal — home buyers know the uncertainty of trying to determine a property's value before making an offer. For sellers, getting an accurate market value is just as important; estate agents' price appraisals should be taken with a large pinch of salt (they might be overpricing to get your business, or underpricing for a quick and easy sale).

So where can you turn? The obvious answer is to an independent licensed valuer — but for some, the \$400–\$500 or more that they charge seems a little price.

Enter automated, or computer-generated, property reports. Pay \$40–\$80 and seconds later you get an email with a report and price estimation for almost any property in Australia. But what information do these reports include and how accurate are their prices?



GRAVE RESERVATIONS

"While Automated Valuation Models (AVMs) may be useful for lending institutions in a portfolio and mortgage situation, I have grave reservations about their general use by consumers."

So says Peter Rossini, Program Director of the University of South Australia's School of Commerce. Peter has published several research papers and studies of automated property valuation models.

What's on offer?

The most popular websites for these reports are:

- **www.homepriceguide.com.au** run by Australian Property Monitors, which is owned by Fairfax and promoted through its Domain property website.
- **www.residex.com.au** claims to have the most comprehensive historical sales and attribute data.
- **www.myrp.com.au** RP Data is 38% owned by First American Corporation, which claims its system automatically revalues every US property *every day*. RP Data claims its systems revalue every Australian residential property weekly, allowing property owners and investors to value their portfolio.

Each website offers a range of reports, including individual property, suburb and postcode profiles. Single property reports include varying amounts of information, including:

- Price estimate or valuation, usually with a big disclaimer. The estimates are based on past sale prices, information from estate agents and statistics.
- Price ranges.
- Sales history.
- Recent sales in the area.
- Property attributes, such as the number of bedrooms, area size, the presence of a car space or pool, nearby amenities.
- Photographs.

Free sample reports are available on each of the websites. >

INTERNET ESTIMATIONS AND A LICENSED VALUATION FOR A SYDNEY PROPERTY, SOLD FOR \$690,000 AT AUCTION TWO WEEKS LATER

Company name	Report name	Report price (\$)	How is the estimate described?	Range quoted (\$)	Valuation or estimate (\$)	Difference from licensed valuation (\$)
Australian Property Monitors	Property Report	59.95	Market price estimate	Not given	548,000	-82,000
Propertyvalue.com.au	Individual Property Report	39.95	Best estimate or estimated value	496,415 to 606,729	551,572	-78,428
Residex	Property Explorer Report	65.00	Initial estimate	484,800 to 706,000	596,100	-33,900
RP Data	RP Estimate	79.95	Unassisted valuation result / estimated value	543,158 to 782,163	662,661	32,661
Licensed valuer	Certificate of valuation	550.00	Current market valuation	Not given	630,000	na

\$140,000 difference

As part of the research for this article, Rachel and Paul, who were preparing to bid for a Sydney house at auction, bought property reports from four websites. They also arranged an independent valuation. The property is just one example, and the results aren't an indication of which websites would be more accurate in a larger sample. However, the online estimates for the same three-bedroom house differed by over \$110,000, ranging from \$548,000 to \$662,661. The least accurate website was over \$140,000 off the eventual sale price. And some websites gave ranges so wide that they were of little use. The licensed valuer was somewhere in between, putting a price of \$630,000 on the property (see the table, above, for more details).

With such wide differences, the couple felt they couldn't rely on the reports, and they weren't sure which to believe. They used the reports plus information from the selling agent to derive their own valuation. "Our own estimate was based on previous sales in the area and the price estimation in the Residex report, which seemed the most comprehensive," Rachel says. "We added \$25,000 for improvements that had been made since the property's last sale, so we reckoned its market value was about \$621,000. That was pretty close to the licensed valuation report of \$630,000."

However, the price the property fetched at auction — \$690,000 — exceeded everyone's expectations. "The unknown factor is what someone else is prepared to pay," says Rachel. "The highest bidder might have been looking for two years and be willing to pay above market value, or might just have loads of money."

Although all the automated reports undervalued the property relative to its sale price, Rachel still thinks some are worthwhile for buyers. "\$50 is a small price to pay to be informed about the market. But some reports are better than others. The least useful reports were those that gave little information about comparable sales in the area or the property's historical sale prices. The reports helped up to a point — but they don't take into account things like recent renovations, and the prices are really only a guide."



< Lack of accuracy admitted

The competing websites get most of their data from the same sources — state government property sales registers. They supplement this with information about recent sales from their estate agent contacts, and details of properties' attributes. Complex statistical modelling of various types (including hedonics, which takes into account individual property attributes, such as the number of bedrooms and presence of a parking space) is then used to generate estimations and values. Each model uses its data differently, putting more or less weight on particular components.

However, each company knows that only a portion of the automated estimates it sells is within the right range. Residex, for example, says estimates will generally "only be in an acceptably tight range in around 70% plus of the cases regardless of who undertakes the calculation". If correct, that means around 30% of estimations from all companies are off the mark.

Residex concedes that "where there is the potential for such significant errors it is possible to unintentionally mislead the public". For that reason, the company's

reports provide "rules and test values for the users to confirm and identify a value from and to help the user become more familiar with the valuation process". RP Data points out the limitations too. "We don't want people thinking they can rely on an automated valuation," it says.

Research in the UK, where automated valuations are also used, acknowledged the overall good performance of the tested models, but found that low-value properties are more likely to be overvalued, and high-value properties are more likely to be undervalued. It also found more variation (errors) in less homogenous segments of the property market, such as regional or rural areas, or suburbs where properties aren't similarly designed in a uniform pattern — which is a much more common situation here than there.

In the UK, automated systems provide an indication of confidence in the accuracy of the valuation (sometimes referred to as confidence levels or uncertainty levels). In Australia, however, only RP Data reports give an indication of the accuracy you can expect, which varies from suburb to suburb. Its 'Forecast Standard Deviation'

Percentage of licensed valuers (%)	Difference from sale price (\$)	Difference from sale price (%)	Number of pages in report	Suburb median (\$)
3.0	-142,000	-20.6	4	\$40,000
2.4	-138,428	-20.1	4	\$94,000
1.4	-93,900	-13.6	17	\$92,500
	-27,339	-4.0	2	Not given
	-60,000	-8.7	8	Not given

(FSD) is a 68% probability that the report's estimated value and the 'true valuation' of the property are within a certain range. An FSD of 15, for example, would mean there's a 68% chance of the estimated value being within $\pm 15\%$ of the true value.

Australian Property Monitors claims that on average, half its reports are within 10% of the sale price, and 80% within 20%. Residex only reveals its confidence level for individual property estimations to banks, not the public.

So property websites recognise their own limitations, and legal disclaimers say consumers shouldn't rely solely on their figures. "Our reports are a guide or tool, but you need to get a valuation later," says Residex. "A valuation is much more detailed and accurate than our Property Explorer reports could ever be 100% of the time."

Australian Property Monitors echoes those comments. "Our reports should be used as part of a suite of research undertaken when buying a property. Customers shouldn't rely on our reports in isolation for financial decisions. Buyers also need building inspections and other due diligence. We have specific disclaimers to protect us because we want customers to use the report as an estimate not a valuation. Only a licensed valuer can give a valuation."

What's missing?

These websites use sophisticated statistical analysis, huge databases and contacts in the industry. But there are many things automated valuations and estimations, based purely on statistics, can't do.

- There's no substitute for physically examining a property; the stats don't take into account renovations and improvements that've been made,

COMING SOON

- On 1 March, Residex is launching a website that will allow the public, vendors and agents to add their opinions on its estimated property prices.
- RP Data plans to offer more accurate electronic valuation reports, a hybrid between an automated valuation model and a physical valuation, using both the automated data and a licensed valuer. Reports are expected to be available in about five hours for less than \$200.

or if the property's fallen into disrepair (there's no inherent reason why this information couldn't be collected — it's just not happening at present).

- Automated systems remove human subjectivity and bias — theoretically an advantage. However, as anyone in the property market knows, emotion and personal bias are often key determinants of a selling price.
- Computer-generated figures are slow to adjust for under- or oversupply of properties in a suburb; such supply and demand factors also affect prices.

As you'd expect, licensed valuers are often critical.

The Australian Valuers' Institute (AVI) says errors in values from automated reports are common and opposes their use of the term 'valuation'. "In general, the people behind these websites and statistics aren't qualified to give a valuation report based on statistics," says the AVI. "A property valuer needs to look at much more than statistics to form a rationale and opinion to provide a valuation assessment. Unless you inspect a property internally and externally, analyse the market, the location and other prudent things that a qualified valuer would do, you can't get a reliable valuation or figure."

Herron Todd White, a national valuation company, says automated reports are useful for banks valuing their portfolios, as the overvaluing and undervaluing of individual properties should even out over a large sample of properties. "But for an individual purchase or seller of an individual property, these automated calculations are next to useless, and in fact could do more harm than good in determining the true market value," it says. "If you're spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a property, spending an extra \$400 for a trained and qualified valuer to value the property properly could save you thousands." ■

CHOICE verdict

If you want to increase your market knowledge, there's no doubt these websites can be useful. They might even provide an accurate price estimate or value to guide you, or to use as bargaining tool when dealing with agents, buyers and sellers. The problem is, though, you'll never know whether the estimate you're using is one of the more accurate ones or not.

There's a proportion of inaccuracies with all of these websites. Without third-party verification of their price estimates, or a comparison against real valuations and sale prices, choosing a website is a bit of a lottery. So use the websites to gather information and aid your research — but don't expect a number you can rely on.



For a long life, know your numbers!

You keep daily tabs on all kinds of numbers. Your phone numbers, Medicare number, all your PINs, tax file numbers ... But do you keep track of the really important numbers that add up to good health?

nutshell

► **CHOICE** shows you the numbers that count and what they measure.
► Start keeping a record of your blood pressure, cholesterol, blood glucose, BMI and waist circumference. If your numbers aren't perfect, know the targets to aim for.

You've been to your doctor, had some tests done, and been given the all-clear — or perhaps not. But the results may as well have been written in a foreign language. What aspects of your health are the tests measuring? *Jargon buster*, below, explains what the units of measurement are all about — mmHg for blood pressure, mmol/L for cholesterol, ng/mL for your prostate gland. But you still need to know what the numbers you're supposed to be aspiring to mean, and what's normal, what's optimal and what's to be avoided — and, importantly, how to stop the numbers from going bad.

We run through the top five numbers and what you should be aiming for as a healthy adult. Knowing them — and whether they need to go up or down — could save your life.

Jargonbuster @'!?

mmHg millimetres of mercury — the height of a column of mercury that's supported by pressure created by the heart pumping blood through the arteries.

mmol/L millimoles per litre — a measurement of concentration, using molecular count.

ng/mL nanograms per millilitre — a measurement of concentration, using weight. There are one million nanograms in a milligram.

Top 5 body numbers

Blood pressure



Aim for Less than 120/80 mmHg. In general, lower is better, although very low blood pressure can sometimes be a cause for concern and should be checked out by a doctor.

Check it! Every two years from age 18 if it's 'normal'. More frequently if you have a personal or family history of hypertension, stroke or heart attack.

Blood pressure is the force of the blood pushing against the walls of the arteries as the heart pumps it around your body. It's always given as two numbers. The top number — systolic pressure — indicates the pressure in the arteries when the heart beats, pumping blood. The bottom number — diastolic pressure — represents the pressure as the heart relaxes between beats.

High blood pressure, or hypertension, is sometimes called the silent killer because it usually has no symptoms — you can have high blood pressure and feel perfectly well. Ongoing, it can lead to serious problems such as heart attack, stroke and kidney disease.

Smoking, physical inactivity, overweight/obesity, poor nutrition and excessive alcohol consumption can all increase your risk of hypertension.

Cholesterol



Aim for Total cholesterol below 4 mmol/L.
Aim for LDL below 2 mmol/L.
Aim for HDL above 1 mmol/L.
Aim for Triglycerides below 1.5 mmol/L.

These targets are for people in a high-risk group (with heart disease, diabetes or a family history of high cholesterol, for example). If you're not, targets may be more lenient. But any lowering of total and LDL levels and any raising of HDL cholesterol can be beneficial, even if you're not reaching the target.
Check it! Every five years from age 45. More frequently if you're in a high-risk group.

Cholesterol is a lipid (a fat-like substance) that occurs naturally in the body. It's essential to help you function properly, but your body generally makes all it needs. Eating too much saturated fat leads to excessive cholesterol in your blood, which can increase your risk of heart disease and stroke. Smoking, hypertension and being overweight are also risk factors. Like high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol doesn't produce any symptoms, and many people first learn they have it only when they have a heart attack or stroke.

Cholesterol is transported in the blood by carriers called lipoproteins, of which there are two main types: low-density lipoprotein (LDL), usually referred to as 'bad' cholesterol because it can clog up your arteries; and high-density lipoprotein (HDL), known as 'good' cholesterol because it helps take cholesterol out of the bloodstream.

The lipid profile from a blood test after fasting gives you a breakdown of total cholesterol, HDL, LDL and triglycerides (a form of fat storage in the body) in your blood. A finger-prick cholesterol test, such as the type offered in some pharmacies for around \$10, gives you total cholesterol only.

Certain lipid ratios are risk factors for some conditions — having high triglycerides and low HDL and/or high total cholesterol is a risk factor for pre-diabetes, for example, so it's useful to know the numbers.

25%

of Australian adults have what's often called Syndrome X. Also known as metabolic syndrome.

Syndrome X is a group of conditions that put you at risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease. It's diagnosed when a person has at least three of the following five risk factors:

Waist circumference



Aim for A waist circumference of less than 94 cm (men), 80 cm (women).
Check it! As often as you like — all you need is a tape measure. Measure your waist at its narrowest point while standing up with your stomach relaxed.

Waist circumference is a measure of abdominal fat. Having fat around your abdomen ('apple' shape), regardless of your body size, has been linked to an increased risk of diseases such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Fat predominantly deposited around the hips and buttocks ('pear' shape) doesn't appear to carry the same risk.

Blood glucose



Aim for 3.0–5.4 mmol/L.
Check it! Every three years from age 55. Start younger and check more frequently if you have a high risk of type 2 diabetes (you're over 45 and obese, for example).

Levels of glucose in your blood are controlled by insulin, and when your body's insulin isn't working effectively this can result in low blood glucose (hypoglycaemia) or high blood glucose (hyperglycaemia).

Chronic hypoglycaemia can lead to brain and nerve damage. Chronic hyperglycaemia indicates diabetes which, if left untreated, can cause progressive damage to body organs such as the kidneys, eyes, heart, blood vessels and nerves.

Nearly one in four adults over the age of 25 has either diabetes or a condition known as pre-diabetes (impaired glucose metabolism). People with pre-diabetes are more likely to get type 2 diabetes and are at risk of heart disease.

• A blood glucose test after fasting can determine if your blood glucose level is within a healthy range. >

- 1) High blood pressure.
- 2) High blood glucose levels.
- 3) High levels of triglycerides in the blood.
- 4) Low levels of HDL cholesterol in the blood.
- 5) Too much fat around the waist.

Making lifestyle changes to improve your body numbers (see *Stop your numbers going bad*, page 32) can reduce your risk of developing Syndrome X.

High blood cholesterol doesn't produce any symptoms and most people learn they have it only when they have a heart attack or stroke.

Having fat around your abdomen ('apple' shape) has been linked to an increased risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

Body mass index



Aim for 18.5 to 24.9. Less than 18.5 is underweight, 25 to 29.9 is overweight, 30 or higher is considered obese.

Check it! Now. Divide your weight (in kilograms) by your height (in metres, squared). A person who weighs 60 kg and is 1.65 m (165 cm) tall, for example, has a BMI of $60 \div (1.65 \times 1.65) = 22$, which is in the normal range.

Body mass index (BMI) is a measure of your weight relative to your height. It gives an approximate measure of your total body fat and indicates whether you're overweight or obese. If you are, it's a risk factor for other diseases and conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, osteoarthritis and some cancers.

But BMI has its limitations:

- It may overestimate body fat in pregnant women, athletes and others who have a muscular build.
- It may underestimate body fat in the elderly and others who have lost muscle mass.
- It can be misleading in children as body fat changes as they grow, and girls and boys also differ in their body fat as they mature.
- For some ethnic groups the cut-offs for being overweight and obese are different. They're lower for Chinese, Indian and Malay people, for example. ■

54% of Australian adults are overweight or obese. Two million Australians have pre-diabetes.

STOP YOUR NUMBERS GOING BAD

Lifestyle can have a huge impact on your numbers. You've heard it all before, but health professionals think these messages are worth repeating:

Stop smoking

+

Eat nutritious food

+

Exercise regularly

+

Drink in moderation

- If you're a smoker, get help to stop.
- Eat a wide variety of nutritious foods. That is, plenty of plant- and cereal-based foods; some lean meat, fish, poultry, dairy and/or alternatives; limit your saturated fat intake; eat only moderate amounts of total fat and sugars; choose foods low in salt; drink plenty of water.
- Exercise regularly. Aim to do at least 30 minutes of moderately intense activity on most, if not all, days of the week.
- If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.

TESTING THE WATER

Can a bone density test tell you if you have osteoporosis? Does a high PSA level mean you have prostate cancer? What about hormone tests and menopause? We look at the tests' diagnostic value.

PSA LEVELS AND PROSTATE CANCER

Prostate specific antigen (PSA) is a protein produced by prostate cells in men. The 'normal' value for total PSA is age-dependent — your body makes more as you get older. But total PSA levels above 4.0 ng/mL may indicate prostate disease — infection, enlargement of the prostate gland or cancer. However, a PSA test isn't recommended as a standalone diagnostic test for prostate cancer.

Only one in four men with an elevated PSA level will have cancer. And some men who have prostate cancer have normal PSA levels. In order to diagnose prostate cancer, a PSA test needs to be used in conjunction with other tests (rectal examination and biopsy, for example).

BONE DENSITY AND OSTEOPOROSIS

Bone mineral density testing isn't recommended as a general screening tool for osteoporosis. But if you have an increased risk of osteoporosis — say you're a woman aged over 45 and you fracture a bone after minimal trauma (falling over, for example) — your doctor might refer you for testing.

The most accurate and reliable procedure for bone mineral density testing is dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry (DEXA or DXA), a test in which a small amount of radiation is used to measure the density of the bones in the spine and hip, the most common areas for a fracture. DEXA compares your bone mineral density to a reference population — most commonly, healthy 30-year-old adults of the same sex — in order to give you a 'T-score'. A T-score of 0 means your bone mineral density is equal to the norm for a healthy adult. A score between +1 and -1 is considered normal or healthy. A T-score of -2.5 or lower indicates osteoporosis.

Bone mineral density tests for all patients aged 70 and over are covered by Medicare.

FSH LEVELS AND MENOPAUSE

Follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) stimulates the production of women's eggs and is important in the regulation of menstruation. FSH levels depend on the stage of the menstrual cycle, and your age. During perimenopause — the transitional period before menopause, which can last many years — FSH levels can fluctuate widely. After menopause they remain elevated. But hormone tests that measure FSH levels are of limited value for diagnosing menopause, as results are so variable. Simply assessing your symptoms can be as good a way to establish whether you're going through perimenopause or have reached menopause.

On test

Home entertainment, whitegoods, household and personal appliances — they're all tested here.



CARPET CLEANERS
TEST PAGE 58

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Plus

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CHOICE has its own testing laboratories, where experienced technical staff put products through their paces. We use test methods from Australian standards, as well as developing our own in order to match the way consumers use a product in reality. We buy most of the products we test, to maintain our independence from manufacturers and so that we know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

For more product tests go to choice.com.au



Caffeine society

Be your own barista — you need a good espresso machine and freshly ground beans.

nutshell

► Test results for 19 home espresso machines: 10 tested recently and nine that are still available from last year's test (March 2007).

► You don't need to spend a fortune: \$180–\$250 gets you a machine that makes good coffee and is easy to use.

Many people reckon the smell of coffee is even better than the taste. Grinding the beans then using them to make a brew means you get to enjoy both aroma and taste at their freshest and best. The good news is you don't have to spend a fortune to get a good home espresso machine. Team a little education (see *Top five tips*, page 37) with practice — and freshly ground good-quality beans — and it's likely you'll be very happy with the results from our top models.

Three of the machines we report on are semi-automatic, the rest are manual. The main difference is that a semi-automatic model switches off when it's poured a preset amount of coffee into the cup. With a manual, you have to keep an eye on it and cut off the flow when there's enough coffee in the cup (30 mL for a regulation espresso).

Fully automatic machines, like those we reported on in August 2005, do almost everything for you, including grinding the beans and transferring the spent coffee to a container within the machine, which you then empty.

The coffee we used was a popular supermarket brand of coffee beans, which we ground just before use. If you buy pre-ground coffee, your results may not be as good as ours — the freshness of the beans and the fineness of the grind are critical to the final result. If you buy premium, freshly roasted beans your results could be even better. Experiment a little, and see what difference it makes and how to get what you like.

The long and short (black) of it

The two best models are the MAGIMIX L'Espresso and SUNBEAM Café Latte that we tested last year: both are still available and are good all-rounders. The Best Buy SUNBEAM Café Espresso Stainless is almost as good and costs only \$179.

Espresso lovers need go no further than the KRUPS K2 Plus Pump Espresso. It scored 80% in the coffee taste test, a score rarely achieved by domestic espresso machines. But if your latte-loving friends front up for a fix, the news isn't so good: it scored worst for milk frothing. >

What to look for

When you're in the shop, ask the sales assistant to make a cup of coffee using the machine you're interested in. Many large retailers have working machines on the floor so this shouldn't be a problem.

BASICS TO CHECK

- If you like your coffee with milk, check the **milk-frothing mechanism** to ensure it will make creamy, quality froth without large bubbles. Some machines come with an extra attachment called a froth enhancer — while it's easy to use it often puts large bubbles into the milk, which isn't ideal. We've found that generally a better quality of creamy froth is achieved without the froth enhancer, though it takes some time to master the method.
- An **exterior** with few grooves will be easier to clean and won't trap dirt. While stainless steel and brushed aluminium machines look sexy they take some elbow grease to keep clean.
- With **semi-automatic** machines, **programmable coffee delivery** lets you adjust the amount of coffee in your cup.
 - The **controls** should be easy to operate and any operation lights should be clearly visible.
 - A **cup warming plate** — all the tested models have one.
 - A large-capacity **water tank** that's easy to fill up, a large filter basket that's easy to fill and empty, and an easy-to-clean drip tray.



What to buy



MAGIMIX L'Expresso Program Automatic 11232

PRICE \$399

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to use, with good controls.
- Easy-to-clean exterior.
- Good for frothing milk.
- Excellent at making consecutive cups of coffee with a consistent temperature.
- Semi-automatic.

BAD POINTS

- Nothing major.

A GOOD ALL-ROUNDER



SUNBEAM Café Latte EM5600

PRICE \$299

GOOD POINTS

- 'Drip tray full' indicator.
- Very easy-to-clean exterior.
- Good for frothing milk.

BAD POINTS

- Nothing major.

A GOOD ALL-ROUNDER

The freshness of the beans and the fineness of the grind are critical to the final result — so experiment with your machine.



KRUPS K2 Plus Pump Espresso XP 4020

PRICE \$200

GOOD POINTS

- Very good coffee-making score — the best on test.
- Good ease of use score.
- 'Drip tray full' indicator.
- Easy-to-clean exterior.
- Excellent at making consecutive cups of coffee with a consistent temperature.

BAD POINTS

- Poor milk-frothing score.
- Relatively small water tank.

FOR ESPRESSO LOVERS



BEST BUY

SUNBEAM Café Espresso Stainless EM3800

PRICE \$179

GOOD POINTS

- Good coffee-making score.
- Good ease of use score.
- Good milk-frothing score.
- Easy-to-clean exterior.

BAD POINTS

- Nothing major.



DELONGHI Living Innovazione EC330S

PRICE \$249

GOOD POINTS

- Good coffee-making score.
- Good ease of use score.
- Very good controls.
- Excellent at making consecutive cups of coffee with a consistent temperature.
- The lightest machine on test — easy to store away.

BAD POINTS

- Relatively small water tank.
- Only scored 60% for milk frothing.

EASY TO STORE



VIBIEMME Domobar Manuale

PRICE \$1299

GOOD POINTS

- Good ease of use score.
- Excellent milk-frothing score.
- 'Water tank empty' sensor switches the pump off.
- Very easy to use the commercial-size filter.
- Very good controls.

BAD POINTS

- Difficult to keep the exterior clean.
- The exposed group head gets very hot.

FOR CAPPUCCINO LOVERS

About the rest

A lower score in the coffee taste test was the big difference between the rest of the models and those in the *What to buy* list, though the cheapest, the \$140 BREVILLE BarVista, wasn't too far off the pace.

The DELONGHI Le Cube uses only Nespresso capsules, which can be ordered online, by mail or phone. The machine is quick and easy to operate, and relatively mess-free. However, the capsules are more expensive than regular coffee, and you can't just pop down to the corner shop to buy a few if you run out. You're also beholden to the quality of the coffee in these capsules: when we tested this model last year, the coffee scored 70% in the taste test, compared with only 55% this time. While it's not unreasonable to expect the flavour and quality of a particular coffee to vary over time, it's not ideal when you have no alternative.

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE		
Brand / model (in rank order)	Type	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Milk-frothing score (%)
Magimix L'Espresso Program Automatic 11232	Semi-automatic	77	78	75 (A)
Sunbeam Café Latte EM5600	Manual	76	76	75
# Krups K2 Plus Pump Espresso XP 4020	Manual	73	70	35
# Sunbeam Café Espresso Stainless EM3800	Manual	72	72	70
# DeLonghi Living Innovation EC330S	Manual	71	70	60 (A)
# Vibiemme Domobar Manuale	Manual	70	70	90
Krups XP 4050	Manual	69	70	55
Solis Crema SL 90	Manual	67	76	85
# Sunbeam Café Series Twin Thermoblock System EM6910	Semi-automatic	67	80	85
Rancilio Miss Silvia	Manual	66	70	85
# Breville BarVista BES200	Manual	65	72	60 (A)
# DeLonghi Le Cube EN185.M + Aeroccino	Semi-automatic	64	76	60
# DeLonghi Living Innovation EC750	Manual	64	70	60
Ascaso Dream MF	Manual	63	76	70 (A)
Breville 800ES	Manual	63	74	75 (A)
La Pavoni Eurobar De Luxe V230	Manual	62	66	80 (A)
# Breville Ikon BES400	Manual	59	70	65 (A)
Saeco Via Venezia Espresso	Manual	59	72	80 (A)
# Vice Versa Koala Evolution Art. 02807 ev	Manual	59	72	60

HOW WE TESTED

Residual taste To remove any factory smells and tastes our tester pumped a litre of hot water through each of the machines, then made 12 cups of espresso coffee (not for testing), one after another.

Ease of use Our tester checked how simple the machines are to use, trying out the controls, the group handle/filter (see *Jargon buster*, far right) and how easy the machine is to refill with water and coffee.

Temperature He measured the coffee temperature produced in each machine.

Froth He frothed milk in a jug, looking for a fine, pourable texture.

Taste For the all-important taste test, we invited two coffee industry professionals, along with our home economist, to rate 30 mL short blacks (espressos) from each machine in 'blind' tastings.

Meet the expert taste testers



Matthew Gee



David Gee



Fiona Mair

David and Matthew Gee are from Barista Basics Coffee Academy in Sydney. Fiona Mair is CHOICE's home economist. She's a food expert with extensive experience in judging cooking and taste test results.

COFFEE-MAKING COMPONENTS		FEATURES		SPECIFICATIONS			
Temperature score (%)	Temperature consistency score (%)	Automatic turn-off	Cord storage	Programmable coffee quantity	Heat-up time (min:sec)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Weight (kg)
76	95	✓	✓	✓	1:30	31 x 26 x 25	5.7
75	85	✓			0:45	33 x 26 x 27	9.1
71	93				1:15	32 x 24 x 25	5.9
75	83				1:45	33 x 21 x 27	5.8
85	95		✓		1:45	30 x 26 x 28	4.0
61	83				3:45	34 x 23 x 42	17.4
77	100			✓	1:30	32 x 25 x 25	6.2
73	88		✓	(C)	1:45	31 x 28 x 24	7.2
72	98	✓	✓	✓	2:15	38 x 33 x 33	11.0
72	60				2:00	35 x 24 x 29	11.8
75	75				1:00	31 x 22 x 28	4.5
78	73			✓	1:00	25 x 23 x 32	4.8
84	88				2:15	33 x 29 x 23	6.0
68	88		✓		1:30	34 x 24 x 28	6.5
75	83		✓		2:00	32 x 26 x 31	11.2
76	93				1:30	30 x 22 x 27	5.5
80	83	✓			1:15	31 x 28 x 25	5.0
80	93		✓		1:30	33 x 24 x 29	7.0
78	83		✓		2:15	31 x 27 x 33	4.3
							Contact
							Price (\$)
							www.cambur.com.au
							www.sunbeam.com.au
							Groupe SEB: 02 9748 7944
							www.sunbeam.com.au
							www.delonghi.com.au
							www.espressocompany.com.au
							Groupe SEB: 02 9748 7944
							www.diamond-c.com.au
							www.mocopan.com.au
							www.breville.com.au
							www.delonghi.com.au
							www.delonghi.com.au
							www.cafefino.com.au
							www.breville.com.au
							www.euroespresso.com.au
							www.breville.com.au
							www.saeco.com.au
							1300 782 852

USING THE TABLE

We checked the availability of models from last year's test and included updated information in this table.

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Coffee making: 60%
- Ease of use: 30%
- Milk frothing: 10%

Coffee-making score consists of

- Taste: 80%
- Coffee temperature: 10%
- Temperature consistency (when making four cups of coffee in quick succession): 10%

Heat-up time is the time taken to heat the machine to operating temperature — not scored, but included for information.

Price Recommended retail as of December 2007.

TABLE NOTES

Newly tested models

(A) The test was done with the froth enhancer removed as this method gave a better result.

(B) This model scored higher overall in last year's test, due to a better score in the coffee taste test. See About the rest?, far left, for more.

(C) There are six preset quantities plus manual control.

TOP FIVE TIPS TO GET THE BEST COFFEE

Hints for the home barista, which you can find in CHOICE, March 2007, or at choiceextra.com.au, has a wealth of information about getting the most out of your machine. Here are our top five tips:

- Use good-quality, freshly ground coffee. Buy yourself a burr grinder if you don't already have one — CHOICE, July 2007, or choiceextra.com.au, have the results of our last test.
- Keep the water in the tank fresh.
- Warming the machine for 15 minutes before using it will help keep temperatures more consistent over consecutive cups. Warm the cups too — all the machines on test have a cup warmer.
- The fineness of the grind and the packing of the coffee (after tamping) should be such that the machine allows 30 mL of coffee to come out in 25–30 seconds. If it takes less than that, the grind is probably too coarse or the tamping too light and the coffee will taste weak. Longer than this and the tamping may have been too firm or the grind too fine, and the coffee will have an overextracted, bitter taste.
- Latte artists, froth your milk immediately after making an espresso, otherwise the coffee will cool down and the artistically essential crema will start to disappear.

Jargonbuster @!?

Group The **group handle** is the bit that holds the filter, and the **group head** is the part of the machine that you lock the handle onto. Some of the machines came with a commercial-size group head, group handle and filter. These have a slightly wider opening (58 mm vs 51–52 mm for the others), making the filter easier to fill. Some aficionados also argue they provide better thermal stability and retention, though our results showed a commercial-size group head doesn't necessarily mean better coffee.

An alternative is a **dual-floor (also called dual-wall) filter** with a small outlet hole that creates back pressure by restricting the flow of coffee. Machines with a dual-floor filter are a better choice if you're using pre-ground coffee, because the fineness of the grind and freshness of the coffee aren't so critical — these filters help produce some sort of crema, regardless of how good (or bad) the coffee is.



Mobile minefield

Confusing plans and disappearing networks conspire to make choosing a mobile phone a complex business.

nutshell

► If you want your mobile phone to be your main point of communication, choose your plan very carefully.

► If you have a CDMA phone, it'll soon be nothing more than a paperweight, following the upcoming replacement of the CDMA network with Next G.

As highlighted in our 2007 Shonky Awards, mobile phone plans are anything but easy to understand. The table (pages 42–43) shows the recommended retail price of each model because it's the only consistent way to show the value of each phone. However, it seems users rarely pay for their new phone outright, instead choosing from the dizzying array of pricing plans available from the various mobile phone carriers that may or may not be linked to the home phone and/or internet access bill. This of course may bring with it a long-term contract, often linked to one network, and a penalty fee if you decide the plan doesn't suit.

What's with Next G?

As of the beginning of 2008, less than 30 mobile phones are compatible with Telstra's Next G network. So if you decide to go with Next G, your choice of model will be significantly restricted compared to more than 100 models available to GSM and 3G users.

Of the 33 mobiles covered in this report, only one model (NOKIA 6120 Classic) supports Next G. However in CHOICE's story on smart phones (December 2007/January 2008), in which the focus was more on multimedia and mobile office features, four of the 13 models tested were Next G compatible.

Don't confuse Next G with 3G. If you want the multimedia features available on Next G and use your phone mainly within the major capital cities and surrounding areas, a 3G mobile from one of several carriers such as Vodafone, Optus, 3 or Telstra will provide a more competitive plan as well as a much greater choice of model (a column in the table lists which of the tested models are 3G; they're all GSM-compatible too).

Telstra's Next G network operates in the 850 MHz frequency and uses High Speed Downlink Packet Access (HSDPA) to provide faster download speeds.

The Next G network services 98% of the population, including much of the network coverage serviced by CDMA. But 98% of the population doesn't mean 98% of the landmass of Australia, and many disgruntled CDMA users are dissatisfied with the Next G mobile model choices on offer. CDMA use has declined steadily over

the past few years, with existing CDMA phone owners receiving information and enticements to move over to Next G over the past several months.

Unfortunately, recent tests (by independent farmers' organisation the Kondinin Group) found that most Next G handsets available at the time failed to deliver reliable and equivalent coverage to the CDMA network.

"Telstra could be better directing some of its resources towards improving the poor range of Next G handsets instead of promoting the virtues of video calling, watching Foxtel TV and picture messaging over the phone handsets," the Kondinin Group said in its report in *Farming Ahead* (www.farmingahead.com.au).

In an effort to help rural mobile users find the right model, Telstra has introduced a 'blue tick' for phones suitable for rural areas, although only four had earned this recommendation at the time of going to press. Check out the Telstra site (www.telstra.com.au/cdmaupgrade) for more information.

The Federal Government has established a freecall Next G customer support service on 1800 888 888 to let users report problems and provide feedback on performance issues.

Using your phone overseas

All the phones in the table can be used on the Australian digital GSM networks from Telstra, Optus, Vodafone, Virgin *et al*. As GSM is also widely used overseas, chances are you can use your mobile when travelling. You can do this in various ways — if you use your normal network provider it's called roaming, and you'll need to check which countries it has roaming agreements with and what the call charges are. Sometimes a cheaper way to do it is to buy a new SIM card for the country you're visiting when you arrive.

All the models are at least dual-band, which means they can operate on both the 900 and 1800 MHz bands used in Australia and several overseas countries. Tri-band and quad-band models support more countries and are particularly useful if you travel more widely. (All but the NOKIA 1110i, 1600, 2626 and 5200 are at least tri-band.) >

What to look for

FEATURES AND FUNCTIONS

All or most of the tested models have the following:

- **Optional vibration alert** instead of ringing.
- **Keypad locking.**
- **SMS texting.**
- **Li-ion battery.**
- **Colour display** (except the NOKIA 1110i).
- **Internal antenna.**
- **Alarm.**
- **Polyphonic ring tones.**
- **SMS memory** in the phone in addition to that on the SIM card, so you can save additional messages.
- The ability to store **additional phone numbers** and an email address for your contacts.
- **Calendar** with reminder function.
- **GPRS** (except the NOKIA 1110i, 1600): This stands for 'general packet radio service'—it allows you access to web-like applications available over the mobile network.
- **MMS compatible** (except the NOKIA 1110i and 1600). This allows you to send and receive messages with photos and/or sound.
- **Hands-free use** A speakerphone allows you to make a call without holding the handset to your ear.
- **Flight mode** (except the Nokia 1110i, 1600, 6070, 6080 and 2626) is a handy feature for air travellers, as you can turn your phone functionality off but still be able to use your mobile as a music player.
- **Bluetooth** wireless radio technology that allows a range of electronic devices, such as mobile phones, mobile phone car kits, computers and PDAs, to easily communicate with each other over a range up to 10 m. A recent version of Bluetooth (A2DP) allows you to listen to your music without cables via a pair of **Bluetooth stereo** headphones. Of the top 10 overall performers in this latest test, only the NOKIA 2626 didn't support Bluetooth stereo headphones.

- A **USB connection** lets you transfer files to and from your computer. Some models use a commonly available mini or micro USB connection and can have the phone appear on the PC as a removable drive.
- If you like to listen to music on the go, look for a model with a **built-in FM radio** and/or **MP3 player**. Most phones with these functions provide a headset. If not, check the table to see if the phone has a standard stereo jack so you can use your own **headphones**.



- **Camera resolution** As a comparison with the camera resolution shown for the phones in the table, new standalone digital cameras have a resolution of at least 4 megapixels.



- A **memory card** allows you to store photos and video clips and transfer them to a computer or printer. Not all the phones with a memory card slot come with a card, so you may have to buy one separately. Check to see the exact type of memory card you'll need, as they're all tiny and look very similar but aren't interchangeable.

Recent tests found that most **Next G** handsets failed to deliver reliable and equivalent coverage to the CDMA network.

What to buy



SAMSUNG SGH-G600 (GSM)

PRICE \$515

GOOD POINTS

- Very good SMS performance.
- Five megapixel camera.
- Easily accessible removable memory card.
- Can charge the phone via a USB port.
- Can use standard stereo headphones.

BAD POINTS

- Music player can be confusing.

BEST
OVERALL



SONY ERICSSON W880i (3G & GSM)

PRICE \$899

GOOD POINTS

- Very lightweight.
- Easily accessible removable memory card.
- Can use standard stereo headphones.
- Easy to transfer photos to a PC.
- Can be used as a removable drive.

BAD POINTS

- Two megapixel camera resolution is only good enough for postcard-sized prints.

GOOD
OVERALL

If you decide to go with Next G, your choice of model will be significantly restricted compared to GSM and 3G users.



SONY ERICSSON W660i (3G & GSM)

PRICE \$599

GOOD POINTS

- Has two sets of music player keys, one on the keyboard and one on the side of the phone.
- Easily accessible removable memory card.
- Can use standard stereo headphones.
- Can use the phone as a removable drive.

BAD POINTS

- Cursor control is small, fiddly and imprecise.
- Two megapixel camera resolution is only good for postcard-sized prints.

BEST
FOR MUSIC



SONY ERICSSON W610i (GSM)

PRICE \$499

GOOD POINTS

- Has two sets of music player keys, one on the keyboard and one on the side of the phone.
- Easily accessible removable memory card.
- Can use standard stereo headphones.
- Can use phone as a removable drive.

BAD POINTS

- Thin, hard keys uncomfortable to use.
- Two megapixel camera resolution is only good for postcard-sized prints.

BEST
FOR MUSIC



NOKIA N73 (3G & GSM)

PRICE \$629

GOOD POINTS

- Has two lenses, one for photos and one for video.
- Easily accessible removable memory card.

BAD POINTS

- Music player is difficult to use.

BEST
FOR PHOTOS



NOKIA 2626 (GSM)

PRICE \$109

GOOD POINTS

- Very good call handling.
- Very good battery performance.
- Can use standard stereo headphones.
- Inexpensive.

BAD POINTS

- Dual-mode means limited support when travelling overseas.
- No Bluetooth.
- No music player.
- No camera.

BEST
BASIC
MOBILE

Users rarely pay for their mobile phone outright, instead choosing from the dizzying array of pricing plans available.

HOW WE TESTED

Testers checked the following aspects to put together each phone's overall score.

Battery This is mainly based on the time-in-use result, but testers also considered the charging time and battery status warning.

Sensitivity They measured the phones' receiving sensitivity and sending power (particularly important in areas with poor network coverage) in both the 900 MHz and 1800 MHz bands.

Everyday use/ergonomics/SMS A user panel assessed the instruction manual; everyday use (such as ease of answering a call, storing a number into memory and dialling a number stored in memory); ergonomic features, such as the ease of using the keys and menus; SMS use (writing and receiving an SMS and suitability of the display for SMS).

Sound quality For both incoming and outgoing calls, testers carried out a number of acoustic measurements, such as frequency response. In addition, a user panel subjectively rated the sound quality of calls.

Music quality Our testers assessed the ability of the phone to perform as a music player.

Picture quality Where applicable, they assessed the phone's digital camera, the display quality, and the transfer and storage of pictures.

If a phone doesn't have a camera or can't play music, the scores for those aspects isn't zero; instead the weighting for those scores is distributed evenly across the other scores.

Versatility Testers checked each phone against a list of features and functions, and assessed its suitability as a mobile office and for fun and games.

Portability They assessed the weight and size of the phones, and the ease of locking and unlocking the keypad.

Time in use They continuously drained the batteries under various conditions in a network simulator. The time in this column is the average of all the tested scenarios.

Standby time They measured how long it takes for the phone's battery to drain when turned on and taking no calls.

Durability

- **Shock resistance** Testers put the phones in an 80 cm diameter barrel that was then turned, simulating falls from, say, a table or out of a shirt pocket. After five, 15 and 25 turns the phones were checked for damage. There was a maximum of 50 falls. This is a fairly severe test.
- **Water resistance** They stored the phones in hot, damp conditions, and carried out a rain test.
- **Workmanship** Testers assessed the build quality of the phones.

ONE FOR THE FASHIONISTAS LG KE850 Prada (GSM)

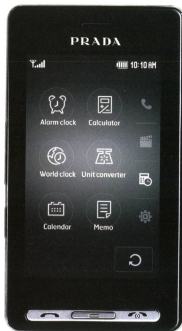
PRICE \$899

Although not a top scorer, the stylish LG KE850 takes design cues from fashion label Prada and delivers some substance to back up its bling.

The phone can be used as a storage device, which means you can easily download the photos you took at your last glittering function with the 2 megapixel digital camera (with autofocus).

A touchscreen allows access to the various menus and controls and, although it didn't perform well as a music player, you do get all the options, including FM radio, Bluetooth stereo and support for standard headphones.

And when you have to deal with the hustle and bustle of the paparazzi, the Prada phone should shine, as it also proved to be one of the most durable phones we tested.



The stylish Prada isn't a top scorer but it delivers some substance to back up its bling.

IMAGE: LG

Flight mode is handy for air travellers: it lets you turn the phone function off but still use your mobile as a music player.

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE												
Brand / model (in rank order)	3G	Overall score (%)	Battery score (%)	Sensitivity score (%)	Everyday use score (%)	Ergonomics score (%)	SMS score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Music quality score (%)	Picture quality score (%)	Versatility score (%)	Portability score (%)	Durability score (%)	Time in use (hours:minutes)
Samsung SGH-G600		69	69	71	80	54	81	69	68	61	64	68	63	6:31
Sony Ericsson W610i		68	70	73	61	68	61	69	71	61	75	73	65	6:28
Sony Ericsson W880i	✓	68	69	73	62	63	64	60	69	64	72	84	65	6:23
Samsung SGH-D900i		67	61	74	82	56	69	72	51	63	59	78	66	6:38
Sony Ericsson K550i		67	71	73	61	65	64	64	63	61	68	70	65	6:31
Sony Ericsson T650i	✓	67	62	73	61	68	63	68	67	69	61	72	81	5:48
Sony Ericsson W660i	✓	67	66	77	62	66	61	63	72	61	72	72	67	6:25
Nokia 2626		66	83	80	70	58	62	52	na	na	37	77	51	7:28
Nokia 3110 Classic		66	55	70	78	64	67	64	nt	56	73	74	64	5:31
Nokia 5300 Xpress Music		66	50	76	78	54	76	57	68	63	84	59	64	4:27
Nokia 5700 Xpress Music	✓	66	67	70	63	61	71	68	47	64	79	60	50	4:14
Nokia 6233	✓	66	67	74	80	59	68	63	52	63	66	64	59	5:00
Nokia 6288	✓	66	57	78	80	58	75	63	37	69	79	51	64	5:17
Sony Ericsson S500i		66	60	78	68	59	64	68	62	65	71	73	54	6:32
LG KE850 Prada		65	58	77	64	56	53	63	54	61	71	78	79	6:13
Motorola Motokrzz		65	66	80	65	46	49	68	50	56	73	71	78	6:45
Nokia 6070		65	72	78	79	66	73	59	na	25	54	72	65	6:29
Nokia 6300		65	55	76	75	59	68	56	40	67	72	74	64	4:28
Nokia 8600 Luna		65	57	80	80	49	75	68	35	58	65	55	81	5:00
Motorola Motorazr ² V8		64	52	76	73	38	73	70	40	61	64	66	82	5:24
Nokia 6110 Navigator	✓	64	64	70	64	51	71	69	29	62	82	52	61	4:13
Nokia 6120 Classic (A)	✓	64	61	71	64	62	65	67	42	63	67	75	55	4:08
Nokia 7500 Prism		64	47	73	75	57	75	62	58	62	64	79	59	3:52
Nokia N73	✓	64	70	67	63	61	63	63	49	72	65	49	62	5:11
Samsung SGH-J600		64	60	86	77	51	56	68	48	53	49	77	65	6:00
Samsung SGH-U700V	✓	64	56	68	70	51	59	67	49	61	73	79	69	3:55
Nokia 6080		63	69	77	75	61	69	59	na	26	54	69	65	6:02
Nokia 1600		62	85	74	60	51	45	60	na	na	22	76	58	9:09
Nokia 5200		62	62	76	77	47	74	57	57	35	66	60	61	4:27
Nokia N93i	✓	62	69	72	64	38	63	66	54	69	75	27	50	4:32
Samsung SGH-L760	✓	62	59	65	70	53	61	71	56	54	57	73	68	4:17
Nokia 1110i		61	76	73	62	54	51	59	na	na	21	77	60	6:18
Nokia N76	✓	61	43	68	64	54	71	61	30	66	77	66	70	3:08

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is a combination of the following scores:

- Battery life: 17.5%
- Sensitivity: 12%
- Everyday use: 9%
- Ergonomics: 5.25%
- SMS: 10%
- Sound quality: 9%

- Music quality: 5%
- Picture quality: 10%
- Versatility: 10%
- Portability: 7%
- Durability: 5.25%

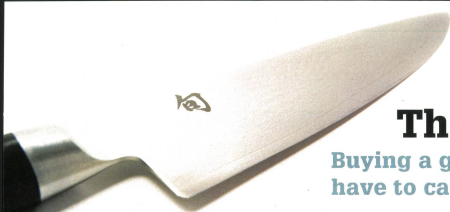
Features in the table See *What to look for*, page 39, for an explanation of these.

	FEATURES								SPECIFICATIONS					
	Charging times (minutes)	Mini or micro USB connection	USB data cable included	Stereo Bluetooth (A2DP)	FM radio	Stereo headset supplied	Standard headphone jack (mm)	Supplied memory (MB)	Memory card slot	Weight (g)	Dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Camera resolution (MP)	Contact	Price (\$)
	130		✓	✓	✓	✓	3.5	1024	Micro-SD	105	102 x 48 x 16	5.0	http://au.samsungmobile.com	515
5	150			✓	✓	✓	3.5	512	MS Micro	93	102 x 46 x 14	2.0	www.sonyericsson.com.au	499
5	150		✓	✓		✓	3.5	512	MS Micro	71	103 x 47 x 11	2.0	www.sonyericsson.com.au	899
	105		✓	✓	✓	✓		1024	Micro-SD	82	104 x 51 x 15	3.0	http://au.samsungmobile.com	599
	150		✓	✓	✓	✓	3.5		MS Micro	95	102 x 47 x 17	2.0	www.sonyericsson.com.au	449
5	130		✓	✓	✓	✓	3.5	256	MS Micro	97	104 x 47 x 14	3.2	www.sonyericsson.com.au	899
5	145			✓	✓	✓	3.5	512	MS Micro	93	102 x 46 x 14	2.0	www.sonyericsson.com.au	599
5	130				✓	✓	2.5			91	104 x 43 x 18		www.nokia.com.au	109
	215	Mini		✓	✓		2.5		Micro-SD	87	109 x 46 x 16	1.3	www.nokia.com.au	260
	170	Mini		✓	✓	✓	3.5	256	Micro-SD	107	93 x 49 x 22	1.3	www.nokia.com.au	429
	90	Mini		✓	✓	✓	2.5	1024	Micro-SD	115	108 x 51 x 17	2.0	www.nokia.com.au	559
5	100				✓	✓		64	Micro-SD	111	109 x 47 x 19	2.0	www.nokia.com.au	389
5	110			✓	✓	✓		512	Mini-SD	119	99 x 47 x 23	2.0	www.nokia.com.au	449
5	133			✓	✓	✓	3.5		MS Micro	94	99 x 47 x 14	2.0	www.sonyericsson.com.au	199
5	135			✓	✓	✓	3.5	256	Micro-SD	85	99 x 54 x 12	2.0	www.lge.com.au	899
5	105	Mini	✓	✓		✓			Micro-SD	102	103 x 43 x 17	2.0	www.motorola.com.au	630
	130				✓					92	105 x 45 x 19	0.3	www.nokia.com.au	199
5	150	Mini		✓	✓	✓	2.5	128	Micro-SD	94	107 x 44 x 15	2.0	www.nokia.com.au	389
	130	Micro	✓	✓	✓	✓	2.5			143	107 x 46 x 17	1.9	www.nokia.com.au	720
	130	Micro	✓	✓		✓				118	103 x 54 x 12	2.0	www.motorola.com.au	749
	86	Mini		✓	✓	✓	2.5	512	Micro-SD	126	101 x 49 x 20	2.0	www.nokia.com.au	759
5	155	Mini	✓	✓	✓	✓	2.5		Micro-SD	89	105 x 46 x 16	2.0	www.nokia.com.au	549
	130	Mini		✓	✓	✓	2.5	512	Micro-SD	83	109 x 44 x 15	2.0	www.nokia.com.au	399
5	100				✓	✓		128	Mini-SD	116	111 x 50 x 21	3.2	www.nokia.com.au	629
5	135		✓		✓	✓			Micro-SD	86	98 x 46 x 16	1.3	http://au.samsungmobile.com	299
5	132			✓		✓			Micro-SD	86	103 x 50 x 12	3.2	http://au.samsungmobile.com	599
5	140				✓	✓				93	105 x 45 x 20	0.3	www.nokia.com.au	219
	245									82	104 x 45 x 18		www.nokia.com.au	89
0	165			✓	✓	✓	2.5	256	Micro-SD	103	92 x 49 x 23	0.3	www.nokia.com.au	309
	90				✓	✓		1024	Mini-SD	164	109 x 61 x 26	3.2	www.nokia.com.au	1029
5	125		✓	✓	✓	✓			Micro-SD	93	100 x 47 x 17	2.0	http://au.samsungmobile.com	399
5	170									80	104 x 44 x 18		www.nokia.com.au	79
5	95	Mini			✓	✓	3.5	256	Micro-SD	115	107 x 52 x 14	1.9	www.nokia.com.au	679

TABLE NOTES

na Not applicable: doesn't have a camera
or can't play music.
nt Not tested.

(A) Works on Telstra's Next G network.



The cutting edge

Buying a good cook's knife doesn't have to carve up your budget.

nutshell

► Price isn't everything: two of our top-rating knives cost considerably less than many others on test.

► Choosing a knife comes down to personal preference. Knives come in a variety of sizes, weights and handle types — play around with different models to see which suits your hand best.

Modern kitchens have more gadgets than any other room in your home. As convenient as many of them might be, there's still one object that'll get more use than everything else combined ... the humble kitchen knife. While it doesn't need plugging in or an instruction book, knowing a little about knives can help you get the best from your blade.

CHOICE tested 13 fine-blade (non-serrated) 20 cm cook's or kitchen knives, priced \$38–\$249, to see which ones made the cut.

An extension of your arm

While it matters how well a knife cuts and how sharp it is — the aspects CHOICE can test — knives are also a personal choice. You need to find one that feels comfortable in your hand. Maggie Beer — author of *Maggie's Harvest* and star of the ABC TV show *The Cook and the Chef* — says feel and balance are what she looks for in a knife.

"It has to feel good as soon as you put it in your hand. If a knife feels right you can get to the stage where it

truly becomes an extension of your arm rather than just a kitchen tool."

Because of this, we didn't include ease of use in our evaluation of the knives. The models in the *What to buy* list are the best for cutting and the sharpest, and are good knives to try out when you're buying, but the best knife for you also needs to feel good in your hand.

Know your knife

Forged, stamped, tangs and grinds ... what's what when it comes to your most important kitchen accessory?

Forged knives are made from one single piece of steel that's been heated, moulded, hardened, tempered and then ground to a cutting edge. It's a labour-intensive process and forged knives are often the most expensive (though not necessarily the best).

Stamped knives are machine-stamped out of a piece of steel and then ground, polished and honed.

One-piece seamless knives These newer-style knives are also stamped, but the blade and handle are all metal, in one piece. The GLOBAL knife in this test is a >

What to look for

IMPORTANT FEATURES

If you're left-handed, check that the handle will suit you. We enlisted the help of a left-handed tester to assess each knife for comfort and he had no problems using any of the models on test, but hold them to make sure they're suitable for you. The SHUN knife on test had a handle designed for a right-handed person, but even so our left-hander didn't have much trouble using it.



What to buy



GLOBAL Cook's Knife 20 cm

PRICE \$135

COMMENTS

- Stamped knife.
- Very lightweight.
- One-piece seamless metal knife.

GOOD POINTS

- High initial sharpness: sharp enough for immediate use by a chef.
- Cutting performance is excellent.
- Well-balanced.

BAD POINTS

- Our male assistant found the handle a little small.
- The handle isn't smooth and some people could find it uncomfortable to use.



VICTORINOX Cook's Wide Blade

PRICE \$60

COMMENTS

- Stamped knife.
- Fairly lightweight.

GOOD POINTS

- Very good cutting performance.
- A fairly comfortable knife, with a good-sized handle and non-slip grip.
- Fairly well-balanced.
- Very high initial sharpness: sharp enough for immediate use by a chef.
- Reasonably priced.

BAD POINTS

- None to speak of.



WÜSTHOF Classic 20 cm

PRICE \$249

COMMENTS

- Forged knife.
- Heavy.

GOOD POINTS

- Very good cutting performance.
- Well-balanced.

BAD POINTS

- Handle curve can feel uncomfortable for a larger hand.
- Not quite sharp enough after purchase for immediate use by a chef.
- Expensive.



SCANPAN Classic Cook's Knife 20 cm

PRICE \$90

COMMENTS

- Forged knife.
- Heavy.

GOOD POINTS

- Very good cutting performance.
- Very high initial sharpness: sharp enough for immediate use by a chef.
- Comfortable grip, good-sized handle.
- Fairly well-balanced.

BAD POINTS

- Can sit on its back with the blade facing upward, which is a cutting hazard.



SHUN Cook's Knife 20 cm

PRICE \$220

COMMENTS

- Forged knife.
- Slightly heavy.
- Handle is designed to be used in the right hand.

GOOD POINTS

- Very good cutting performance.
- Well-balanced.
- Comfortable.

BAD POINTS

- Not quite sharp enough after purchase for immediate use by a chef.
- Expensive.

A full tang (the extension of the blade into the handle) runs all the way through the knife and can contribute to better balance.

About the rest

- The MESSERMEISTER, WMF KOCHMESSER, and FURI scored lowest for sharpness: they weren't sharp enough for immediate use as supplied, even in a domestic kitchen.
- The FURI is blade-heavy.
- The MESSIMEISTER, MUNDIAL, and ZWILLING are all slightly blade-heavy.
- The WILTSHIRE is handle-heavy.
- The blade on the MUNDIAL and WILTSHIRE knives has little curve, making them less suitable for fast chopping.
- Some of the knives tested have a handle that allows the knife to sit on its back, leaving the blade facing upwards as a cutting hazard. Our tester found the F DICK, MESSERMEISTER, MUNDIAL, WILTSHIRE and ZWILLING all did this (and the SCANPAN in the *What to buy* list).



USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Cutting performance: 70%
- Sharpness: 30%

Cutting performance is based on rapid chopping, cutting, slicing and cubing — see *How we tested*, far right.

Sharpness score includes an initial sharpness assessment plus a sharpness assessment after calibrated blunting.

TABLE NOTES

(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.

◀ one-piece seamless model with a hollow handle — see its profile, page 45, for what it looks like.

Tang This is the metal that extends from the blade into the handle; a full tang runs all the way through the knife and can contribute to better balance than a tang that doesn't go to the end of the handle (a half-tang).

Stay sharp

Once you've got a knife that works for you it's important to take good care of it. Here are some ways to keep the life in your knife:

- Keep your knives clean and store them in a knife block, or use a guard to protect the blade from being knocked and chipped if they're in a drawer.
- Don't leave food to dry on the blade as some foods contain acid, which can permanently stain it.
- The jury is still out on whether it's safe to put a good kitchen knife in the dishwasher — many manufacturers claim their products are 'dishwasher-safe' but go on to say it's 'not recommended'. If you want to be on the safe side, hand washing is the way to go.
- Use a chopping board that's softer than the knife blade, such as wood or plastic, to avoid blunting or getting nicks in the blade.
- Regularly hone your knives using a steel to keep their cutting edge fine. Eventually, though, they'll probably need to be professionally sharpened. Most good cookware shops offer this service. ■

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE				FEATURES	SPECIFICATIONS			
	Overall score (%)	Cutting score (%)	Sharpness score (%)	Dishwasher-safe		Forged or stamped	Weight (g)	Contact	Price (\$)
Brand / model (in rank order)									
Global Cook's Knife 20 cm G-2	84	90	69			Stamped	174	02 9482 6666	135
Scanpan Classic Cook's Knife 20 cm	81	85	70	✓		Forged	312	02 9482 6666	90
Victorinox Cook's Wide Blade Fibrox 5.2063.20	81	85	72	✓		Stamped	190	02 9748 3111	60
Shun Cook's Knife 20 cm DM-0706	80	88	61			Forged	218	02 9938 2400	220
Wüsthof Classic 4582/20 cm	79	85	64			Forged	251	08 9353 2355	249
Icel Platina Cook's Knife 20 cm 101020	75	79	66			Forged	262	02 9316 7642	90
Zwilling JA Henckels Four Star 20 cm Cook's Knife (31071-200) 910	75	80	63			Forged	219	02 8884 6000	188
F Dick Premier Plus Chef's Knife 8" 8144721	73	78	60	✓		Forged	269	03 5243 6052	153
Wiltshire Pro Blade Cook's Knife W1004	72	75	65	✓		Stamped	287	02 9370 8166	38
WMF Kochmesser Gourmet Line Chef's Knife 20 cm	71	78	55			Forged	210	02 9482 6666	145
Messermeister San Moritz Elite 20 cm Chef's Knife 2686-8	70	75	57			Forged	265	02 4367 0123	140
Mundial Cook's Knife 8"/20 cm	68	69	67			Forged	248	02 9482 6666	100
Furi Pro Cook's Knife 20 cm/8" FUR101 (A)	67	73	52			Stamped	279	1800 26 26 96	90

Don't leave food to dry on the blade as some foods contain acid, which can permanently stain the knife.

KNIFE ON TEST



KNIVES IN THE BLOCK

While a 20 cm cook's knife will get most kitchen jobs done, there's a wide array of other types of knife designed for specific jobs. Here are some of the more common ones that you might get if you buy a knife block, or that you can add to your knife set:

- 1 Paring knife** This little knife is handy for peeling and trimming fruit, potatoes and other vegetables.
- 2 Filleting knife** Good for removing skin from fish, butterflying meats and precise work with raw meat, fish or chicken.
- 3 Carving knife** This knife usually has a longer blade but isn't as deep as a cook's knife. The longer blade is good for slicing wider joints, such as cooked ham.
- 4 Chef's or cook's knife** The knives on test: this 20 cm knife is very versatile and can handle a wide variety of foods and textures.

5 Utility or all-purpose knife Similar to the paring knife but with a longer blade; it's good for everyday small cutting jobs.

7 Bread knife The serrated edge of this knife helps cut through a loaf of bread cleanly, without squashing it.

Knife block extras

These round out a knife block or set:

- 6 Honing steel** To keep a good fine cutting edge on your knives.
- 8 Pull-apart shears** Good for cutting chicken around the bones, the shears can also be used for cutting herbs such as chives. They pull apart for easy cleaning and are handy for most kitchen jobs, including opening packaging.

HOW WE TESTED

SLICE AND DICE

Our CHOICE home economist put one of each knife through their paces, slicing and dicing various foods: **Carrots** She sliced carrots to assess the knives' ability to slice hard food evenly without slipping and without resistance.

Cucumber She sliced cucumber to check how each knife could perform delicate work: slicing as thinly as possible without slipping or resistance, which would result in uneven slices.

Parsley She used the knives to chop parsley rapidly, to see if they could chop finely without bruising, crushing or mashing.

Steak She cut and cubed steak to see how well the

knives cut through fat and sinew without much effort and without slipping.

Comfort A male assessor and a left-hander also checked each model for comfort.

SHARP AND SWEET

A second set of knives was sent to a specialist laboratory to assess how sharp they were:

- Immediately after purchase.
- After 50 slicing strokes into a specially calibrated aluminium rod, which is known to blunt the cutting edge. The sharpness was then measured, another 50 blunting strokes made, and the sharpness measured again.



What's new in the laundry?

New washing machines have plenty of snazzy features — but it's still hard to find one that's water-efficient *and* rinses well.

nutshell

► Test results for 43 washing machines, including 14 newly tested models.

► Many of the newly tested washers are water-efficient, but only two achieved it without compromising rinse performance (see right for details).

With the recent emphasis on using less water and the introduction of the water efficiency label for washing machines, the test for rinse effectiveness was introduced to stop manufacturers from gaining water efficiency at the expense of leaving dirt and detergent in your clothes. And the results have shown that relatively few machines rinse effectively *and* are water-efficient: in this latest test, the FISHER & PAYKEL WH70F60W1 and the LG WD-1049C, and previously the ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer EWG1495 all do.

Unexpected problems

The 14 new washing machines presented us with a larger than usual number of problems.

Faulty mechanisms One machine failed during the wash cycle, another made strange noises in the spin cycle and a third leaked from the door, requiring replacement parts.

Rubber shavings Some of the front loaders shed rubber shavings from the door seal. The makers fixed new seals, replaced a pump motor and offered to supply new hoses. While two told us the rubber shavings were normal and should stop with further use, another was sufficiently surprised to send the shredded seal off for analysis.

Mysterious stains Some machines left unexplained yellow/orange stains on our white wash load. A new door seal fixed the problem on one of them, but none of the other manufacturers could satisfactorily explain this problem, and they said they've had no consumer complaints. It might well have been noticeable because of our all-white test load. If you, too, have had inexplicable yellow stains that haven't rinsed out by the end of the wash, let us know, so we get an idea of the extent of the problem.

We can't explain the sudden rush of problems; we just hope you don't start experiencing similar ones at home — be sure to tell us if you do.

'Walking' on floorboards

Over 30% of CHOICE members now own a front-loading washing machine — and a few have had some problems

getting used to one. Some of you recently told us of your front loader "vibrating violently" across a timber floor, so we checked what advice manufacturers give on the topic. And the short answer is: it depends.

The best floor material is concrete, but most manufacturers agree that standing a front loader on a timber floor should be fine, as long as the floor is in good enough condition, level and able to hold the machine's weight, and the machine's feet are adjusted properly and stabilise automatically. To prevent scratches on polished timber, you might want to put a mat underneath.

If the floorboards are in poorer condition, some manufacturers advise putting a panel under the machine so its weight is distributed evenly. Miele also recommends screwing the panel to as many beams as possible under the floorboards to help minimise vibration, and putting the machine in a corner where the floor is most stable.

Off the floor

If you have a bad back or use a wheelchair, squatting or bending to load and unload a front loader can be difficult. To help overcome access problems, you can mount a front loader on a plinth so its door is at waist height. Just make sure the plinth is stable and level, and able to hold the considerable weight of the machine.

Fisher & Paykel says the weight of the machine is sufficient to secure it on a pedestal, if at least the front feet of the machine have levelling feet that can lock. Other makers advise securing it on the pedestal with the brackets supplied to prevent it wobbling off during the spin cycle. Miele recommends securing its front loaders with the retaining clips it sells, and that the plinth be made of concrete that can support 160 kg — it says its front loaders weigh 30–40% more than other brands'.

Electrolux and Whirlpool supply purpose-built pedestals. The Electrolux one (\$319) is suitable for most of the brand's front loaders (except the WF1470). Whirlpool has the AMC906 pedestal for its main range of front loaders and the XAMC892MQ for the 10 kg machine. Both pedestals cost \$279. >

Profiles

The two new models in the *What to buy* list are profiled. For profiles of the other models in the list, see *CHOICE*, September 2007 and March 2007, or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on those issues under 'Washing machines' in the index.

6-7 kg



FISHER & PAYKEL WH70F60W1

PRICE \$1049

- This machine is very good at the things that matter: removing dirt, rinsing, spinning and water efficiency.
- Standard features include a gentle/delicates wash, fast wash (small loads), woollens wash, auto-sensing water level, extra rinse option, 'time remaining' display and variable spin speed with a maximum of 1200 rpm.
- The only downside: You can't do a cold-water 'normal' wash; its minimum temperature for 'normal' programs is 40°C.

7.5 kg or larger



LG WD-1049C

PRICE \$849

- One of the few newly tested machines that's both very water-efficient and rinses well. It also scored well for dirt removal, gentleness and spin efficiency.
- Standard features include a gentle/delicates wash, fast wash (small loads), woollens wash, auto-sensing water level, extra rinse option, 'time remaining' display and variable spin speed with a maximum of 1000 rpm.

BEST BUY

The best flooring material for a washing machine is concrete, but most makers agree a timber floor in good condition shouldn't cause problems.

About the rest

The table, page 52, gives a summary of performance scores, features and specifications for all models tested. Two of the newly tested machines made it into the *What to buy* list. The remaining 12 either achieved very good water efficiency at the cost of rinse performance or very good to excellent rinse performance using lots of water — they're listed below, as well as some other reasons for exclusion from the list.

- Water-efficient, but at the expense of rinse performance: both SIMPSON Eziloaders, MIELE Honeycomb Care, FISHER & PAYKEL Aquasmart WL70T60C and WL70T60D, BOSCH Logixx 8, ARISTON, WHIRLPOOL WFS1071AW and WFS1072AW.
- Water guzzling, but good rinsers: HOMEMAKER, HITACHI and WESTINGHOUSE LT819S.
- Didn't score well for dirt removal: HOMEMAKER, SIMPSON Eziloaders 4S5558E and WESTINGHOUSE LT819S.
- Didn't score well for gentleness: HOMEMAKER, FISHER & PAYKEL Aquasmart WL70T60C and WL70T60D, HITACHI and WESTINGHOUSE LT819S.

What to buy

Small (up to 5.5 kg)

MIELE Novotronic W1511 (fr)	BEST BUY	\$1599
FISHER & PAYKEL MW512 (tp)		\$749
FISHER & PAYKEL GW512 (tp)		\$859

Medium (6-7 kg)

NEW FISHER & PAYKEL WH70F60W1 (fr)		\$1049
BOSCH Maxx Lifestyle Exclusive WAE26470 (fr)		\$1599
BLANCO BFMW7 (fr)	BEST BUY	\$1199
FISHER & PAYKEL GW612 (tp)		\$995
FISHER & PAYKEL Intuitive Eco IW712 (tp)		\$1149

Large (7.5 kg or more)

ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer EWF1495 (fr)	\$1689
BOSCH Logixx 9 WBB24750 (fr)	\$2899
FISHER & PAYKEL Aquasmart WL80T65CW1 (tp)	\$1199

FISHER & PAYKEL Aquasmart WL80T65DW1 (tp)	BEST BUY	\$1199
NEW LG WD-1049C (fr)		\$849

FISHER & PAYKEL Intuitive Eco IW812 (tp)	\$1179
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We've included the FISHER & PAYKEL Intuitive Eco IW812 in the *What to buy* list for large machines as an alternative top loader; a couple more front loaders share its overall score of 74% (see the table, page 52, for details).

(fr) = Front loader (tp) = Top loader

Best buy indicates a model that's a reasonable performer in its size range and whose combined purchase price and running costs are comparatively low. We don't call a machine a Best Buy unless its brand's reliability stacks up in our user survey.

Other models on the list are the top performers overall in their size bracket, but they won't be as cheap to buy and run as the Best Buys. We've included top and front loaders in each size range.

A 'Best Buy' is a model that's a reasonable performer whose combined purchase price and running costs are relatively low.

What to look for

USEFUL FEATURES

For full information on what to look for when buying a washing machine, see CHOICE, March 2007, or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on that issue in the index under 'Washing machines'. Some features listed in the table (page 52) are explained here.

- **Out-of-balance correction**

Automatically detects and redistributes an out-of-balance load, either by spinning slowly before the full spin cycle or by taking in more water (which is what most top loaders do). If you're concerned about high water usage, opt for a machine without this feature or go for a front loader.

- **Water-saver option** Lets you use less water for rinsing or washing.



- **Selectable spin speed** This means you can change the spin speed on some programs. A higher spin speed will give you drier clothes, while a lower speed is better for delicates or fabrics that are easily creased.
- **Auto-sensing water level** This can help you save water, energy and time by automatically adjusting the water level according to the load and/or fabric type. Some machines also adjust the washing action.

A higher spin speed will give you drier clothes, while a lower speed is better for delicates or fabrics that are easily creased.

Built-up for easy reach

The ARISTON Aquatilis AQXXD 149H is designed for "maximum comfort and extreme ease of use". It's built up with a storage drawer underneath and the large door opens around waist height into an inclined drum, which makes it easier to load and unload — you don't have to bend down as much.

There are no problems with the controls located on the door or the detergent dispenser concealed behind it (apparently a child safety feature), as long as you don't forget to add detergent before you start the machine.

Not only does it look different, the ARISTON Aquatilis also has an unusually high five-star water rating. In our test it scored among the best in its size range for water efficiency, using only 58 L of water for a normal wash. However, just like many other newly tested machines, it achieved such low water use at the expense of rinse effectiveness, where it managed to score only 46%. It also trailed well behind the top scorer in its group for dirt removal, and costs around \$500 more than the ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer, which can also be perched up on a pedestal (sold separately) for easier access.



No jet engine, just air

A 'fuzzy wash', where the machine automatically determines the best wash program for the type and quantity of washing, isn't new in the laundry. But the fully automatic HITACHI SF-P80DJ now also has a "jet course", a special feature you can activate to "blow away" water during the spin cycle and improve the spin efficiency.

In our tests the jet course indeed improved the machine's spin efficiency. Compared with the automatically selected program on the fuzzy wash that we used for our evaluation, its spin efficiency increased by 7%. But the 73% it scored for spin efficiency with the jet course is still lower than most front loaders in this size range achieved.



FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre (NSW) assessed the newly tested washing machines. Here's what they had to say about the machines in our *What to buy* list:

- If you have back problems or are in a wheelchair but have good upper body control, a front-loading machine elevated off the floor will be the easiest for you to use. The FISHER & PAYKEL WH70F60W1, ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer, BOSCH Logixx 9 and LG WD-1049C were rated highly. Their doors are easy to open, you can easily pull out a load, the controls are within easy reach and they're easy to clean.
- If you have upper limb dysfunction or weakness, the LG WD-1049C is the most suitable of the newly tested machines in the *What to buy* list. The controls and dispensers on the BLANCO and the MIELE Novotronic are also reasonably easy to use and their doors easy to open and close, so reaching into these machines isn't difficult.
- If you have hand tremors or problems with fine motor function, the best machines will be those with the biggest pushbuttons — test them out in the showroom before you buy. The BLANCO and BOSCH Logixx 9 could be suitable.
- If you have impaired vision or a cognitive impairment, the controls on the MIELE Novotronic and FISHER & PAYKEL MW512, GW512 and GW612 are easy to see and comprehend. The ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer could also be recommended for those with a cognitive impairment.

HOW RELIABLE DO SUBSCRIBERS RATE THEIR WASHING MACHINE?

In our latest reliability survey, subscribers told us whether their washing machine (bought in or after 2000) had needed repairing in the previous 12 months. While more subscribers than three years ago own a front loader, our survey found no significant difference in reliability between the two types. Overall, 10% had needed repair. The most commonly reported problem was the machine going out of balance.

Owners of MIELE, BOSCH and FISHER & PAYKEL washers were more likely to buy the same brand again, while significantly fewer would repurchase a WHIRLPOOL, LG, MAYTAG or ARISTON machine. And of those who wouldn't buy ARISTON again, 29% said it "breaks down too often".

Differences of 9% or more between brands are meaningful. The numbers in brackets are the number of responses we received for each brand.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR	%
All washing machines (7000)	90
BOSCH (328)	97
MIELE (432)	95
SAMSUNG (237)	92
SIMPSON (754)	92
FISHER & PAYKEL (1805)	90
WESTINGHOUSE (260)	89
ASKO (296/88)	88
WHIRLPOOL (697)	88
LG (698)	87
MAYTAG (207)	85
KLEENMAID (130)	83
ARISTON (127)	77

Overall, 10% of washing machines had needed repair. The most commonly reported problem was the machine going out of balance.

HOW WE TESTED

Dirt removal To see how much dirt the machines removed, our testers pinned specially soiled swatches onto a standard load of washing and measured how much light was reflected from them before and after washing in cold water and a standard detergent. The more light, the cleaner the machine has washed the swatch.

Gentleness on clothes Testers attached swatches of easily frayed fabric to the washing and measured the unfrayed area before and after the wash.

Spin efficiency To check this, testers weighed the clothes before and after the wash to see how much water was left in them.

Rinse performance To determine how well the machines keep dirt suspended in the water rather than depositing it back on the clothes, and how well they rinse out the detergent, our testers added a marker chemical to the wash. At the end, they took a sample of the water remaining in the clothes to determine the amount of chemical left: the less there was, the better the rinse.

Water efficiency The testers measured the amount of water used in a cycle (on a 'normal' wash program). The score is based on how much water was used for each kilogram of washing — the less the better.





Be prepared?

Many of the first aid kits **CHOICE** tested could leave you ill-prepared when an accident strikes.

nutshell

► Only one of the 22 kits tested contains all the essential items, but not even that one complies with all the voluntary standard's specifications.

► Nine of the kits provide insufficient equipment to cope with five common household emergencies: major bleeding, serious burn, fracture, foreign body in a wound or eye, and insect or snake bite.

When an accident strikes at home, you may need to stop major bleeding, deal with a serious burn, treat a snake or spider bite, give first aid to someone with a fractured limb, or deal with a foreign body in a wound or eye. But even if you have a first aid kit on hand, will it contain all the items needed to deal with the emergency—or adequate instructions on how to use them?

When CHOICE sent our buyers out, we found a huge range available as well as an astounding number of kits in each range. There are kits for home (small, medium, large, leisure, family, all-purpose) and for the workplace (office, retail, industrial); for travel (car, motor trauma, off-road, boat, outdoor, pocket) and for special purposes (diving and hiking, to name a few). They come in large, sturdy toolboxes or small, clear-plastic containers for easy access, and in compact soft packs that stow away neatly in a daypack or wrap around your waist on walks.

General-purpose kits for use at home range in cost from less than \$20 to well over \$100. So to help you through the jungle of kits on the market, this test takes a closer look at 22 widely available ones that sell for \$120 or less, generally a brand's cheapest in the domestic or general-purpose range.

The standard's being ignored

We tested all 22 kits against Australian standard AS 2675-1983 (Kit B, general-purpose kits). This is a voluntary standard, and while many kits' contents are based on it, none fully complied with it. In fact, only one kit included all the items essential to provide first aid in an emergency, according to the standard: the AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS Household Kit. Not even in this top-scoring kit, however, were all items sized as specified in the standard.

Some kits were just basic 'personal' kits, which are generally cheaper and less comprehensive than 'general-purpose' kits. We included them in this test because they were often described as for 'general purpose', a label that's obviously used to cover a wide range of kits.

Some kits didn't come close to meeting the standard. They lacked, for example, the non-adherent dressing to cover a serious burn, or a triangular bandage for a fractured limb. Others had the correct emergency items but not enough of them, or in sizes not specified in the standard: fewer gauze swabs, different-sized bandages, or bandages that won't stretch enough to do a proper job.

Even basic but essential items such as a pencil and notepad, tissues or a hand towel, plastic bags and >

What to buy



AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS Household Kit 12730

PRICE \$79

GOOD POINTS

- Includes a foil emergency blanket.

BAD POINTS

- One point of the forceps had visible rust after the rust test.
- No resuscitation mask.
- No insect bite treatment.



BRENNISTON Motor Vehicle First Aid Kit Q150W

PRICE \$50

GOOD POINTS

- Includes a foil emergency blanket.

BAD POINTS

- No gauze swabs.
- There are no compartments in the bag, which makes it difficult to find what you want.



FIRST AID KITS AUSTRALIA Medium Risk Home Portable K410GP

PRICE \$110

GOOD POINTS

- Includes a foil emergency blanket and a cold pack.
- No visible rust on the scissors after the rust test.

BAD POINTS

- No inventory.

What to look for

With these contents (based on AS 2675-1983, Kit B) in your 'general-purpose' first aid kit, you should be equipped for a range of emergency situations.

ESSENTIAL KIT ITEMS

- At least nine sterile, **cotton-gauze swabs**, for cleaning wounds and placing over non-adherent burn dressings.
- At least three **disposable hand towels or tissues**, for general cleaning, other than wounds.
- One roll of low-allergenic **adhesive strapping**, at least 25 mm wide x 2.5 m long, to hold dressings in place.
- Two sterile, individually packed, **non-adhesive dry dressings**, 100 x 100 mm, to use for burns, abrasions, cuts, lacerations and weeping wounds.
- Three sterile **wound dressings** of different sizes, to protect wounds, use as an eyepatch, or help control bleeding by applying pressure.
- Three rolls of **stretch bandage**, 50, 75 and 100 mm wide and at least 1.5 m long (and stretchable to twice that length), to hold dressings in place, support injured limbs or give first aid for poisonous bites.
- At least three **sealable plastic bags**, about 150 x 200 mm, for carrying water or severed body parts, making ice packs or disposing of dirty dressings.
- Disposable latex gloves** and an **approved resuscitation mask**, for infection control.

- Two **triangular calico bandages** with at least 900 mm edge length each, to use as slings or dressings, or as bandages to hold large dressings or splints in place.
- 24 sterile, **adhesive dressing strips** in assorted widths, to cover small cuts, blisters and abrasions.

First aid information — books are available from St John Ambulance Australia, the Australian Red Cross and other expert ambulance services.

- One pair of rust-resistant **scissors** about 100 mm long, with at least one blunt point, to cut dressings and bandages, or to cut away clothing.
- One pair of rust-resistant, **pointed forceps/tweezers**, with accurately aligned tips and in a protective case (not shown), for removing splinters and stings.

At least five **safety pins** about 40 mm long, to hold bandages in place.

One **pencil and notepad**, to record times and details or for passing messages.

Optional kit items

- At least six individually wrapped **isopropyl alcohol swabs**, for cleaning areas around wounds.
 - One plastic squeeze-bottle of **saline solution**, about 100 mL, clearly labelled with usage instructions and expiry date, to clean eyes, wounds and burns.
- Optional items (not shown)**
- Sting relief treatment**, 10 mL minimum, clearly labelled with its purpose and expiry date, to relieve discomfort from stings or bites.
 - One **aluminium foil blanket**, to keep a casualty warm.
 - Hydrogel burn treatment**, to treat burns if no cool water is available.
 - One sterile, thick and absorbent **'combine' dressing**, 90 x 200 mm, to cover wounds.

About the rest

The remaining kits scored considerably worse — for lacking essential items, providing insufficient quantities of the items they did include, or failing the rust or bandage-stretch tests. In general, you get what you pay for. Almost all the kits tested that cost \$30 or less occupy the bottom end of the table. While their contents might be fair value for the price you pay, they aren't comprehensive enough for a 'general-purpose' kit.

HOW WE TESTED

Contents Our tester checked the items included in each kit and awarded different scores based on: full compliance with the standard; or fulfilling the function but not having the required number or size of items; partially meeting the function; or items were absent, or failed to meet the function.

Information The tester also awarded scores for the inclusion of an inventory and basic first aid information.

Rust test For this test, she put the washed and rinsed scissors and forceps in plastic containers lined with wet cotton wool, and checked for rust after one week.

Bandages To determine whether bandages would stretch to at least twice their length, she placed clamps on each of the bandages one metre apart, stretching them to capacity before comparing their stretched length with their unstretched length, recorded earlier.

DETAILS				
Instructions	Container	Dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Contact	Price (\$)
	Plastic box with handle	160 x 325 x 185	www.redcross.org.au	79
	Soft bag	55 x 275 x 195	www.brenniston.com.au	50
	Plastic box with handle	150 x 400 x 225	www.firstaidkitsales.com.au	110
	Plastic box with handle	115 x 290 x 250	www.quell.com.au	55
	Plastic box with handle	155 x 321 x 180	www.firstaidkitsales.com.au	74
	Soft bag	50 x 330 x 205	03 9555 1133	55
	Soft bag	70 x 260 x 180	www.stjohn.org.au	50
	Plastic box with handle	145 x 400 x 230	www.firstaidinternational.com.au	100
	Plastic box with handle	140 x 325 x 170	www.firstaid.com.au	50
	Soft bag	80 x 280 x 165	1800 248 859	30
	Soft bag with handle	90 x 245 x 175	www.royallifesaving.com.au	55
	Soft bag	40 x 170 x 140	www.redcross.org.au	25
	Soft bag	70 x 210 x 150	www.equip.com.au	60
	Plastic box with handle	150 x 405 x 225	www.firstaidinternational.com.au	70
	Plastic box	70 x 195 x 135	www.brenniston.com.au	20
	Plastic box	65 x 195 x 135	www.quell.com.au	17
	Plastic box	70 x 195 x 135	www.stjohn.org.au	20
	Soft pouch	70 x 135 x 95	1800 252 467	14
	Plastic box	45 x 215 x 140	131 772	20
	Soft pouch	110 x 200 x 135	www.royallifesaving.com.au	30
	Soft bag	80 x 180 x 130	www.firstaid.com.au	25
	Soft bag	60 x 215 x 160	www.equip.com.au	30

Did you know?

- **Putting together your own kit** Any container is suitable as long as it's resealable, waterproof and gives you good access when open. You don't want to waste time rummaging through the contents when you need a bandage fast.
- **Painkillers, antiseptic creams, insect treatment** Check the use-by dates regularly and update the contents as necessary.
- **Items missing** Both FIRST AID INTERNATIONAL kits had scissors, forceps and other items missing. We don't know whether they'd never been included or had gone astray before they were sold, but if a kit isn't sealed, items can go walkabout. Look for tamper-proof packaging to ensure no items have been removed or swapped; when you buy a kit online, check its contents against the inventory on receipt.
- **Discounts** Members of the NRMA or RACV receive a 15% discount when purchasing a ST JOHN first aid kit, after showing their card.

USING THE TABLE

Score For the overall score, we considered:

- Compliance with the standard.
- Provision of adequate information on how to use the items.
- Rust resistance.
- Bandage 'stretchability'.

Price What we paid in June 2007 (excluding postage).

TABLE NOTES

(A) Plastic, not latex.



THE FIRST, VERY BASIC STEPS

The best way to learn first aid is to attend an accredited course. In an emergency, you probably won't have the time to read instructions thoroughly. First aid courses are available in every state — contact an organisation such as the Australian Red Cross or St John Ambulance Australia.

Summarised below are some very basic steps you can follow in an emergency while waiting for an ambulance. They're based on information provided by St John Ambulance Australia and other experts.

Burn

- Don't touch the burn, don't apply anything, and don't try to remove anything that sticks to it.
- Remove jewellery or clothing that isn't stuck.
- Cool the burnt area with running cold water for 20 minutes (or hydrogel, if there's no water).
- Cover it with a sterile, non-adherent dressing.
- Seek medical aid if the burn is larger than a 20 cent piece or on the face, hands, feet or genitals.

Severe bleeding

- Remove or cut clothing to expose the wound.
- Apply pressure (with a pressure pad, or your gloved hands, if the casualty can't do it).
- Squeeze the wound edges together.
- Raise and support the injured part.
- Bandage the wound and, if it still bleeds, apply a second pressure pad.
- Check circulation below the wound.
- If severe bleeding persists, give nothing to the casualty by mouth and call an ambulance.

Fracture

Signs/symptoms can include pain, difficulty moving, tenderness and swelling, discolouration, bruising.

- Control bleeding and cover the wound.
- Ask the casualty not to move the injured part.
- Apply a broad bandage to immobilise the fracture.
- Support the limb by placing a splint along it.

Eye injury

- Don't touch the eye (or let the casualty rub it).
- Don't try to remove an object that's embedded in or protruding from the eye.
- If tears don't remove the object, flush the eye with cool, flowing water.
- If not successful, place a sterile dressing over the eye, but don't apply pressure.
- Seek medical aid.

Snake or funnel-web/mouse spider bite to limb

- Apply a very firm roller bandage, starting just above the fingers or toes and moving up the limb as far as possible.
- Splint the limb and stop the casualty moving.
- Call an ambulance, and write down the time of the bite and the bandaging.

Knocking spots off

Getting to the stain quickly, and having a good carpet cleaner should get you out of trouble.

nutshell

► It's a good idea to have a carpet spot cleaner in the cupboard because the sooner you treat a mark, the less likely it is to stain.

► In general, these cleaners are more effective on nylon carpets.

► Some varieties contain bleach and may irreparably discolour darker coloured carpet.

Life is a messy business. Whether you've had mud trodden through your house or a glass of wine upended on your brand new carpet, you'll be looking for a carpet spot cleaner — and fast. But is it worth buying a specialised cleaning product, or are tap water and elbow grease enough? CHOICE put 13 carpet spot cleaners to the test on two different types of cream-coloured carpet: nylon cut pile and wool sisal.

There's no guarantee you'll have carpet cleaner on hand to treat a spill immediately. So we did two tests: in one round, the cleaners were applied straightaway; in the other, testers left the stain to sink in for 24 hours and then applied the cleaner. Most results were better when it was applied immediately, and the top-performing carpet cleaners gave better results than self sponging with water — with the exception of coffee stains, which water alone removed if applied immediately.

Different cleaners gave varying results, depending on carpet type. Overall, we got better results on nylon carpet than on wool. Wool carpet was also likely to be slightly damaged in the cleaning process.

It's a good idea to try any of these cleaners on an unobtrusive piece of carpet first. Many contain bleach — but they don't necessarily warn you about this in their instructions. If you have dark carpet, they could leave you with a light patch. Some cleaners also make the cleaned spot more vulnerable to further staining. ■

HOW TO CLEAN PRACTICALLY ANYTHING

Published by CHOICE Books, *How to Clean Practically Anything* is a great help around the home. Here's what it says about carpet cleaning:

- The quicker you act, the more likely you are to get a stain out.
- For liquid stains, blot up as much as you can, then, using a damp sponge, wipe inwards so you don't spread the stain any further.
- If you don't have carpet cleaner in the house, try sponging with vinegar, water and detergent, then rinse with water.
- For red wine, pour on soda water and blot it. Try this a few times and if you don't get a result, try detergent and water or a carpet cleaner.
- Glycerine may loosen old coffee and tea stains.



What to buy

BISSELL HOMECARE Portable Oxy Deep Cleaner

GOOD POINTS

- Good on nylon carpet, OK on wool.
- Doesn't change the colour of the carpet.
- Protects wool carpet from resoiling.
- No discernible damage to nylon carpet.

BAD POINTS

- Can damage wool carpet.
- Makes nylon carpet prone to resoiling.
- The supplied applicator brush can damage carpet.



CAVALIER BREMWORTH CARPETS Carpet Stain Remover

This spot cleaner was only trialled after 24 hours as its instructions say it's only suitable for dry stains.

GOOD POINTS

- Good on nylon carpet, OK on wool.
- Damage to wool carpet minimal.
- Protects both carpets from resoiling.
- No discernible damage to nylon carpet.

BAD POINTS

- Slightly lightens the colour of the carpet.



GLITZ Carpet Stain Remover

Exclusive to Bunnings

GOOD POINTS

- The best on nylon carpet, second-best on wool carpet.
- No discernible damage to nylon carpet.
- Doesn't change the colour of the carpet.

BAD POINTS

- Can cause damage to wool carpet.
- Makes both carpets prone to resoiling.



LONG LIFE Carpet Cleaner

Exclusive to Bunnings

GOOD POINTS

- The best on wool carpet, second-best on nylon carpet.
- No discernible damage to nylon carpet.
- Doesn't change the colour of the carpet.

BAD POINTS

- Can damage wool carpet.
- Makes both carpets prone to resoiling.



FOR NYLON CARPET

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE		
Brand / model	Nylon overall score (%)	Treated area after resoiling	Colour change to carpet after stain removal
Glitz Carpet Stain Remover	85	Much darker	None
Long Life Carpet Cleaner	76	Much darker	None
Bissell Homecare POD Portable Oxy Deep Cleaner	73	Noticeably darker	None
Cavalier Bremworth Carpets Carpet Stain Remover (A)	73	No change	Slightly lighter
Spot Shot Instant Carpet Stain Remover	73	Noticeably darker	None
De-Solv-It Sticky Spot and Stain Remover Natural Citrus Base	69	Much darker	None
Citro Clean Multi-purpose Cleaner	66	Much darker	None
Preen for Carpets OxyAction	66	Noticeably darker	None
OzKleen Carpet Power	59	Much darker	None
Preen for Carpets Powershot	59	Noticeably darker	None
Scotchgard Oxy Carpet Cleaner Plus Stain Protector	59	Much darker	None
Orange Power Carpet & Upholstery Spot Cleaner	55	Much darker	None
Karpet Stain Removing Powder	52	Slightly darker	None

USING THE TABLES

Scores In both tables, the overall scores for each product are made up of:

- Stain removal effectiveness: 70%. Each agent (red wine, cordial, coffee and shoe polish) is equally weighted. The one-minute score and the 24-hour score were also equally weighted.
- Carpet damage score: 30%.

TABLE NOTES

(A) Only trialled in 24-hour test as instructions say it's for dry stains only.

FOR WOOL CARPET

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE			SPECIFICATIONS	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Wool overall score (%)	Treated area after resoiling	Colour change to carpet after stain removal	Size	Price (\$)
Long Life Carpet Cleaner	58	Noticeably darker	None	500 mL	7.99
Glitz Carpet Stain Remover	54	Noticeably darker	None	750 mL	4.98
Bissell Homecare POD Portable Oxy Deep Cleaner	52	No change	None	175 mL	7.49
Cavalier Bremworth Carpets Carpet Stain Remover (A)	49	No change	Slightly lighter	400 mL	6.89
Preen For Carpets OxyAction	48	Slightly darker	None	510 g	7.25
De-Solv-It Sticky Spot and Stain Remover Natural Citrus Base	44	Noticeably darker	None	500 mL	13.97
Orange Power Carpet & Upholstery Spot Cleaner	43	Much darker	None	375 mL	4.68
Preen For Carpets Powershot	42	Noticeably darker	None	1000 mL	7.26
Spot Shot Instant Carpet Stain Remover	42	Noticeably darker	None	375 mL	7.99
Citro Clean Multi-purpose Cleaner	41	Noticeably darker	None	500 mL	6.45
Scotchgard Oxy Carpet Cleaner Plus Stain Protector	40	Slightly darker	None	400 mL	7.89
OzKleen Carpet Power	37	Much darker	None	750 mL	5.99
Karpet Stain Removing Powder	34	No change	None	500 g	8.01

HOW WE TESTED

Each carpet spot cleaner was tested on stains of red wine, diluted raspberry cordial, coffee and shoe polish.

Two timeframes Each staining agent was deposited on a 25 cm x 25 cm piece of carpet, left for one minute, then blotted and treated with one of the carpet cleaners. The cleaner was applied until the stain came out, up to a maximum of five times. The same process was used for the 24-hour test, minus the blotting.

Resoiling Testers also looked at resoiling resistance, as some carpet cleaners can leave the spot they

cleaned more prone to dirt collection. A strip of each carpet was treated with carpet cleaner, left overnight, then the whole piece was uniformly covered in sieved dirt. After 24 hours, the carpet was thoroughly vacuumed and checked to see if it looked darker.

Evaluation All the pieces of carpet were then evaluated. Testers rated each product for:

- Cleaning effectiveness.
- Gentleness/physical damage to carpet.
- Stain resistance after resoiling.



Reels on wheels

In-car DVD players may seem like a good idea for keeping kids occupied, but read this before buying one — for safety's sake.

nutshell

► German safety tests have shown some in-car DVD players to be potentially fatal in the event of a crash.

► No tested model was very good, but the PHILIPS is OK and the AXION LMD 4702RU won't hurt the bank balance too much.

They don't offer much of a cinematic experience (not that your five-year-old will have much of a discerning eye), but due to their ability to keep squabbling kids entertained in the car, portable car DVD will be high on many parents' wishlist for the next driving holiday.

CHOICE tested seven portable dual-screen (7 inch; 18 cm) DVD players with two different configurations: a separate, unrestrained, screenless player with two remote screens, and a player with one built-in screen and one remote screen. Both attach to the rear of the headrests of the front seats.

We assessed their ease of use, picture and sound quality and their ability to play damaged DVDs, and found that none of the tested models is outstanding — and they all decrease the safety of the vehicle (see *Safety concerns*, right). Testers also found that they can bring about an unpleasant sensation like motion sickness in the viewer, which worsened if the screen flopped around, as some do. So they're not a good idea if your child is prone to travel sickness.

But if you're set on buying one, the PHILIPS and AXION could give you a bit of peace and quiet in the car.

Safety concerns

We haven't given a safety score for each model, as CHOICE thinks any of the devices could have a negative impact on passenger safety in the event of a crash. The DEKRA Technology Centre in Germany simulated a collision at 32 km/h and found that a DVD monitor, strapped to the seat's headrest by a belt, came loose and went flying into the head of the crash test dummy sitting in the child safety seat.

While the portable DVD player tested in Germany isn't one of the ones we tested, during in-car testing our tester noted the following:

- Products that have a player and two remote screens don't provide any mechanism for the player to be mounted. It's up to the user to decide where it's placed — therefore it could easily become a missile in the event of a crash.
- A player or screen presents a hard surface for a child's face or head (rather than the padded rear of a headrest) if they're thrown forward by heavy braking.
- With the PHILIPS, the player and remote screen are mounted so that they stand away from the headrest, bringing them even closer to the user's face. >

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE					FEATURES		
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Picture quality score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Faulty disc handling score (%) ^a	Type	Headphones (H) or - earbuds (E) supplied	Carry bag
Philips PET708/75	54	59	77	52	28	Player with screen + 1 remote screen		
Axion LMD4702RU	52	54	44	68	31	Player + 2 remote screens		✓
Coby TF-DVD7750	50	56	69	52	18	Player with screen + 1 remote screen	H	
Axion LMD2708QE	47	56	58	34	41	Player with screen + 1 remote screen		✓
DSE G7132	45	61	53	54	0	Player + 2 remote screens	E	✓
Omni PDV742	45	60	52	42	18	Player with screen + 1 remote screen		✓
Teac DV-P380G (A)	45	61	54	54	0	Player + 2 remote screens	E	✓

What to buy



PHILIPS PET708/75

PRICE \$369

One inbuilt and one remote screen.

GOOD POINTS

- Player comes with a rechargeable battery.
- Very good sound quality via earbuds (not supplied).
- Screens have viewing angle and height adjustment.
- Very good onscreen menus.
- Easy to remove from a car.
- Digital audio output.

BAD POINTS

- Screen mounts, especially the player's, allow them to move and vibrate a lot.
- Poor remote control.
- Difficult to install in a car for the first time (subsequent installation is easy if you don't remove the mounting bars, but that means you can't lower the seat headrests all the way).
- No carry bag.
- The screen's mounting brings it closer to a passenger's face.



AXION LMD4702RU

PRICE \$198

Separate player with two remote screens

GOOD POINTS

- Good remote control.
- Easy to install and very easy to remove.
- Digital audio output.
- Can play DivX movies.
- Comes with a carry bag.

BAD POINTS

- Poor sound via inbuilt speakers.
- Poor onboard controls.
- No means to restrain the player in the car.
- Very poor sound via earbuds (not supplied).

None of the tested models is very good, but they'll still give you some peace and quiet from the kids in the car.

SPECIFICATIONS

Regions playable**	Player dimensions (H x W x D, mm)	Weight (kg)	Contact	Price (\$)
2, 3, 4	40 x 205 x 150	1.5	www.philips.com.au	369
2, 3, 4	30 x 165 x 140	1.3	www.strathfield.com.au	198
All	45 x 180 x 165	1.3	www.cobyusa.com	298
2, 3, 4	40 x 200 x 150	1.4	www.strathfield.com.au	249
2, 3, 4	35 x 210 x 175	2.4	www.dse.com.au	299
All	45 x 210 x 150	1.3	www.galas.com.au	399
2, 3, 4	35 x 210 x 175	2.3	www.teac.com.au	399

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Picture quality: 30%
- Sound quality: 20%
- Ease of use: 30%
- Faulty disc handling: 20%

Prices are recommended retail, as of November 2006.

TABLE NOTES

* A zero indicates that the player wouldn't play our test disc at all.

** Instruction manual may state otherwise.

(A) Replaced by the Teac 388G, which is technically similar but has an 8 inch screen.

About the rest

- The COBY and the OMNI both had very poor faulty disc handling. Also, the COBY wouldn't play region 4 (Australian) DVDs until our testers got a code sequence from the distributor to enter via the remote control.
- The AXION LMD2708QE fared OK in terms of picture and sound quality, but its ease of use was poor.
- The TEAC and DSE models appear to be clones, differing only cosmetically from one another. Both were unable to play a faulty disc. The TEAC comes with an AC adapter but the DSE doesn't.

It's important the strap holding the player in position on the headrest is secure and won't detach in the event of a sudden stop.

What to look for

FEATURES

- **Games** Both the DSE and TEAC come with a single game controller with 25 inbuilt games, so only one child can play at a time.
- **Carry bag** All but the PHILIPS and COBY come with a carry bag, which is useful to contain all the separate parts when the system's removed from the car.
- **Holding strap** A strap will hold the player in position, usually at the back of the car seat's headrest. However, it's important that the fit is secure and it won't detach in the event of a sudden stop.
- **Earbuds or headphones** For most of the players, their sound can be improved if you use ear or headphones — and it's also less distracting for the driver. Check whether they're provided with the machine (see the table, page 60).



- **Player with screen** For safety, a player with an inbuilt screen is better than an unrestrained player with separate screens, as an unrestrained player can become airborne in the event of a crash. The PHILIPS, COBY, AXION LMD2708QE and OMNI all have a player with inbuilt screen.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE RUSS

HOW WE TESTED

Picture quality of the inbuilt display Our testers assessed the picture quality of each player by viewing standard patterns and both still and moving pictures. Most of the assessment was done in our lab, but testers also viewed the players in a car, to see whether the screen moved, if it skipped or if the screen was affected by reflections.

Sound quality Testers assessed each model for the technical quality of the sound produced through the analogue stereo headphone socket, using an audio analyser. They measured level linearity, total harmonic distortion, signal-to-noise ratio and channel separation.

Listening tests were also done on the sound delivered through the inbuilt or included loudspeakers,

and through a good-quality pair of earbuds (we didn't test the earbuds or headphones supplied).

Ease of use Testers checked the onboard controls and remote controls are a good shape, with buttons that are adequately sized and spaced, and that labelling is easily understood and in a contrasting colour.

They assessed how easy onscreen menus and indicators are to read, understand and navigate. They also checked how easy the installation instructions are to follow, and if the players are easy to install and remove.

Faulty disc handling To test how well the players handle a damaged disc, testers used a standard test DVD with interruptions in its data layer.

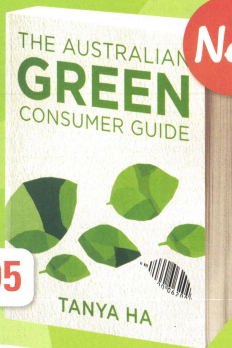
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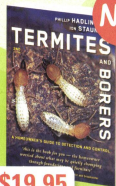
The Australian Green Consumer Guide

Choosing products for a healthier home,
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This essential and comprehensive guide encourages consumers to become informed, get involved and to vote with their dollar. Packed with answers, practical tips and non-judgmental advice to help readers make a real difference in their lives, *The Australian Green Consumer Guide* shows you how to make more ecologically sound consumer choices, whether you're shopping for food, fashion, cars or whitegoods.

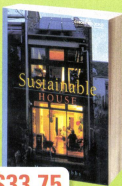


\$29.95



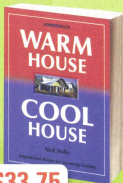
\$19.95

Termites and Borers
A compact and consumer-oriented guide to protecting your home from termites, borers and other timber pests. *Termites and Borers* contains easy-to-read information about termite life, inspection techniques and pest management.



\$33.75

Sustainable House
Sustainable House will inspire you with its story of two ordinary householders who collaborated with experts to achieve their desired result — a house almost entirely self-sufficient in electricity and water. It also provides information that will enable people who have no building, engineering or design skills to create their own sustainable house.



\$33.75

Warm House Cool House
Warm House Cool House inspires and encourages readers with examples of beautiful and comfortable homes that are energy-efficient and immensely livable. Illustrated throughout with photos, sketches and plans, and all Australia's different climatic zones are covered.

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Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Product Safety Policy section of the ACCC on 02 6243 1262.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

FOOD ■ Whyelite Australia has recalled **Whyelite** food products including:

- **Hi-Fibre Country Grain Bread Mix**, 1 kg.
- **Hi-Fibre White Bread Mix**, 1 kg.
- **Lite N'Free Gluten & Yeast-free Bread Mix**, 800 g.
- **Whyelite Natural Supreme**, 1 kg.
- **Whyelite Chocolate Supreme**, 1 kg.
- **Whyelite Banana Supreme**, 1 kg.
- **Chicken Homestyle Soup Base**, 600 g.
- **Homestyle Beef Soup Base**, 600 g.
- **Homestyle Cream Soup Base**, 600 g.
- **Bee Active Muesli Bar**, Almond and Apricot Yoghurt Coated, 50 g.
- **Bee Active Muesli Bar**, Banana, Yoghurt Coated.
- **Bee Active Muesli Bar**, Apricot, Yoghurt Coated, 85 g.
- **Bee Active Muesli Bar**, Apple and Cinnamon Yoghurt Coated, 90 g.
- **Lite Bar Fruit Filled Apricot**.
- **Lite Bar Fruit Filled Apple** 50 g.
- **Lite Bar Fruit Filled Blueberry**.
- **Lite Bar Fruit Filled Choc-Orange**.
- **Super Sauce Mix** (Liquid Butter Option), 200 g.
- **Whyrhythm Chocolate**, 900 g.
- **Meatless Burger Mix**, 855 g.
- **Meatless Schnitzel Mix**, 855 g.
- **Smallgoods Casing**, makes 8 knobs.
- **Wheggs** (egg option), 150 g.
- **Cream D'lite**, 200 g.
- **Whey Delite**, 375 g.
- **Custard Delite**, 500 g.
- **Chocolate Mousse D'lite**, 370 g.
- **Crème Caramel Mousse D'lite**, 370 g.
- **Low Joule Lemon Drink Concentrate**, 250 g.
- **Low Joule Orange Mango Drink Concentrate**, 250 g.
- **SoyaVite**, 1 kg.
- **Natural Whyelite — Best Tasting Milk Alternative**, 680 g.

The problem The products may contain foreign matter.

What to do Don't eat them. Call 07 3849 5744 to obtain a refund.

DRINK ■ Musashi has recalled **Musashi P30 water-based protein drink**, strawberry flavour and orange flavour, 500 mL, and **Musashi P30 water-based protein drink with carbs**, blackcurrant flavour, 500 mL, all best-before dates.

The problem They contain milk product that isn't declared on the labelling.

What to do Don't drink it if you have a milk allergy or intolerance. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 1800 152 126, between 8 am and 6 pm EST.

BABY SWIMMING SEAT ■ Zoggs Australia has recalled **Zoggs Trainer Seat**, a water flotation device consisting of an outer inflatable ring and a

plastic seat connected to an inner inflatable ring. Two products are affected: **Zoggs Trainer Seat** for ages 3 to 12 months, product code number 302212, and **Zoggs Trainer Seat** for ages 12 to 18 months, product code number 302213, batch codes 301J, 302D and 112L. The batch code can be found on the bottom panel of the packaging and on the product. It has been on sale in major retailers, sports stores and aquatic centres since July 2006.

The problem Some products have a weakened or damaged plastic weld in the construction of the seat, and when weight is applied, the seat may fail and the child may slip into the water.

What to do Don't use it. Return it to Zoggs Australia, Reply Paid 4012, Milperra DC NSW 1891, or call 02 9453 2000 to make other arrangements.

BUNK BEDS ■ Hercules Iron has recalled **Asteroid and Comet Bunk Beds**, sold between 9 September 2005 and 26 October 2007. They were sold in all states and territories except WA.

The problem The mattress and slat supports may be dislodged, and there are also possible snagging and entrapment hazards. The bed also doesn't meet certain requirements of the consumer product safety requirements.

What to do Call 03 9357 8062 or email hercules-iron@bigpond.com.au to arrange a replacement.

POWER TOOL ■ Hitachi Power Tools has recalled **Hitachi P13F Planers**, sold since September 2006, with serial numbers 760001-760030, 060001-060015, N60001- N60040, 170001-170147 and 570001-570120. The serial number can be found on the Hitachi name plate.

The problem The anti-kickback device requires repositioning and reconfiguration to provide optimum protection to the operator.

What to do Call 1300 444 822 to make arrangements for remedial action.

TOY ■ Ellayana Trading has recalled **Little Rider Cowboy**, barcode 6939501686106, item number 8610B; **Little Rider Knight**, barcode 6939501686106, item number 8610A; and **Lovely Horse**, item number 051. They were sold in discount stores in the Marrickville, Bankstown and Cabramatta areas of NSW, and some were sold in the NT.

The problem The Little Rider Cowboy contains unacceptable levels of lead, and the Little Rider Knight and the Lovely Horse contain detachable small parts that pose a choking hazard.

What to do Remove them from the reach of children and return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

NIGHT-LIGHT ■ CA Australia has recalled **22 cm night-light bear** in blue and pink. The bear has a pushbutton night-light in the belly, with item numbers CA24531 and CA24532. It was sold in chemists

and independent specialty stores in Queensland, NSW and Victoria.

The problem The product contains small parts that pose a choking hazard to children under three.

What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Call 02 9938 5011 or email the toys@caaustalia.com.au to arrange for a refund and for the product to be returned.

TOY ■ Australian Discount Retail has recalled **Special Mission Combat Force Military Play Set**, sold through outlets trading as The Warehouse — Where Everyone Gets a Bargain, Go Lo, Makro Warehouse and Crazy Clark's between 10 May 2007 and 24 November 2007.

The problem The lead content exceeds specified limits.

What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to any of the above stores for a refund, or for more information call 1800 254 687.

DISHWASHER ■ Andi-Co Australia has recalled certain **AEG dishwashers**. The models affected are Favorit 40760, product number code 911915612/01, and Favorit 44080IM, product number code 911925634/01, within the serial number range 71900000 and 72399999.

The problem A wire connector may overheat and cause a small fire in the control panel.

What to do Until it's been checked, switch it off at the power point when the cycle is complete, and don't allow it to operate unattended, or use the delayed start program. Call 1300 650 020, Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm EST, with your model, product number code and serial number ready, to arrange for a technician to inspect the dishwasher.

BATHROOM HEATER/EXHAUST ■ Chief Kitchenware has recalled **Airflow Bathroom Heater Exhaust Fan and Light Combinations**, model numbers 6600R, WE; 6600A, WE; 6601A, WE; 6600ATP, WE; 6600X, WE; 6600H, WE; and 6600D, WE. The affected models were installed in 2002 or later.

The problem The lamps may overheat, creating a fire hazard.

What to do Don't use it. Unscrew and remove the heat lamps and store them safely. Call 1800 677 845, Monday to Friday, 9 am to 8 pm, and Saturday, 9 am to 5 pm, EST, and have the model number ready.

CYCLING GLOVES ■ Shimano Benelux BV has recalled **Shimano, Pro and Saint cycling gloves**, manufactured in Pakistan.

The problem They may contain benzidine levels in excess of the EU specification.

What to do Don't use them. Return them to any Shimano dealer, or go to <http://cycle.shimano-eu.com> for more information.

+ CONSUMER POLICY REVIEW

+ PRODUCT SAFETY

Productivity Commission signals major changes to consumer law

CHOICE welcomes the Productivity Commission's draft report on the review of Australia's consumer policy framework. Its main recommendations aim for fairer, safer and more efficient consumer markets. However, we think it fell short on some key consumer protections.

CHOICE wants consumer groups to be able to lodge 'super-complaints' that oblige a regulator to investigate an issue.

The central recommendation is to establish a single generic consumer protection law, replacing the current situation where each state and territory has different laws to protect consumers. The commission also recommends increasing the funding of legal aid and financial counselling services.

To ensure the Commonwealth gives sufficient weight to consumer interests in the new system, CHOICE will ask the Productivity Commission to extend its recommendations to include:

- A government-funded consumer policy advisory body to undertake independent research and assess the effectiveness of proposed and existing regulatory interventions.
- Legislation to require fair contract terms and conditions in all consumer contracts.
- The ability for consumer groups to lodge 'super-complaints' with the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) that oblige the regulator to investigate the identified issue.



The proposed national consumer protection law includes significantly stronger enforcement powers for the ACCC and improved processes for class actions. But we think the law could be even better. CHOICE will seek better provisions to enable third parties to take action when consumers encounter post-sale problems, and stronger protection against unfair trading.

We're disappointed with other aspects of the review. While making welcome recommendations in the areas of consumer credit and product safety, the commission ignored the critical areas of food, health and telecommunications. CHOICE will recommend that it adopt a program for future work that commits resources to these priority areas. ■

Consumers' protection from unsafe products must improve

In December, we dubbed 2007 the Year of the Toxic Toy. We hope, in 2008, Australian consumers will finally get the product safety system they need.

In 2007, millions of toys around the world were recalled for being unsafe. Unfortunately, some safety failures were all too common: many toys were recalled for being a choking hazard. Others were truly weird: for example, the popular toy Bindeez was recalled because the beads contained a chemical which, when swallowed, turned into the dangerous illicit drug GHB, also called Fantasy.

This year, Commonwealth, state and territory governments are considering the future of Australia's product safety system. CHOICE wants them to improve it to better protect consumers from these sorts of hazards.

Currently, product safety is covered by a confusing array of regulations at the state and Commonwealth levels. Overlapping jurisdictions result in poor enforcement of existing product safety laws.

CHOICE is campaigning for a single national system of product safety, overseen by a Commonwealth agency such as the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. This must be supported by improved data collection about injuries from consumer products. All Australians deserve equivalent, effective protection from unsafe products. ■

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How to use this index

Bold type indicates a test, survey or trial report, unbolded type indicates other articles.

* Indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, letters or recalls.

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The prize for best entry goes to M Hawkins for the mobile mowing. Thanks also to B&K Morey, J Tutticci, A Tam, P McGinley, C Doyle, J Eddy, D Salmon, A Quintner and M Milan for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Please don't email us your entries — we need the originals.

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